THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 3

- MURDER WITH MALICE
- MINUTE FOR MURDER
- HEAD OF A TRAVELER

THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 3

Urbane, Oxford-educated Nigel Strangeways stars in this third exclusive treasury in the Mystery Guild's classic series. Nigel and creator Nicholas Blake (aka C. Day Lewis, Poet Laureate of England) present you with a delightful dilemma: Should you savor the literary tidbits that grace each page... or race to the startling conclusion?

Murder With Malice: The Mad Hatter, a twisted practical joker, is loose in Wonderland—a popular prewar British vacation camp similar to our latter-day Club Med. The Wonderland that beckons Nigel Strangeways, however, is no vacationer's paradise. So far, the Mad Hatter's spree has included sabotaged tennis balls, ruined talent shows and, worst of all, attempted drownings. A fascinating array of British characters, including a penniless heiress and Nigel's tailor—himself an amateur sleuth—join Nigel in Wonderland. Together, they'll treat you to an outing of "delectable humor, suspense and originality."
—*The New York Times Book Review*

Minute for Murder: As the war winds down, shortly after V-E Day, Nigel is still fast at work at the Ministry of Morale. His job description suddenly shifts to murder solving when Nita, secretary and mistress to a top department head, is poisoned by cyanide. Interestingly, shortly before her demise, her fiancé—thought killed in the war—had displayed at his homecoming party his combat memento: a Nazi

(continued on back flap)

Book Club Edition

THE NICHOLAS BLAKE TREASURY

Volume 3

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PART I

MR. PERRY OBSERVES

Chapter I

Young Mr. Perry was going to camp. Not a Territorial camp, nor a Scout camp, nor yet a Concentration camp. No, a very different lay-out indeed; a camp which would have made any nomad tribesman rub his eyes in amazement and take to his heels; one, Mr. Perry hoped, that would provide lavish material for the note-books which weighed down the suitcase in the rack over his head.

With mild approval young Mr. Perry eyed the factories that flashed past into the wake of the train. Factories were permissible, to be encouraged even. Temples of the Machine. Mr. Perry, who had never worked at bench or conveyor-belt, was all for the Machine. Of course, there were factories and factories. One did not altogether allow those factories of an earlier day, ramshackle, all bits and pieces, leaking steam from every joint like super-annuated dragons, standing amidst a desolation of rank grass, rusty boilers, discarded equipment, which studded the countryside where Mr. Perry had been brought up. Those gothic survivals of laissez-faire and individualist rapacity had served their purpose. History, as Mr. Perry put it to himself, had passed them by. There might be a certain romantic aspect in their decay; but, with all deference to the early Auden, whose weakness for rusting metal and escaping steam was a notorious instance of the foibles of genius, one must insist that such romanticism would not do.

Mr. Perry, for his part, upheld the neo-classicism. He liked things to look prosperous and ship-shape. That factory over there, for instance, standing by itself amid green fields, white, spruce and functional as a gun-boat on the Chinese station—his heart warmed to it, particularly when it was shown to have been the last outpost of civilisation. For now the train had entered pure countryside, and for Mr. Perry the country was not so much lamentable as non-existent. People lived there, no doubt, for strange reasons of their own; but they were not people in the sense he understood the word: they were not crowds; and Mr. Perry quite genuinely felt at home only in a crowd—apart from the fact that crowds were, so to speak, his business.

Averting his eyes from this barren spectacle of cows, barns and orchards, he turned to the proper study of mankind, his fellow-passengers. There were three of them in the compartment, a family party. An elderly woman, gazing placidly out at the scenery: a blonde, her daughter, who was lapping up *Film Frolics:* and the paterfamilias. The latter was certainly, for Mr. Perry, the show piece. A man of preternatural fatness, whose belly dwarfed even the *Times* newspaper that half covered it, his face a mass of folds and creases, his clothes miraculously uncreased. He wore a black cut-away coat, decorously striped trousers, and an old-fashioned cravat. His face, huge and grave, resembled that of a bloodhound afflicted with an excess of thyroid. He might have sat as model for the caricature of a Capitalist in a Bolshie newspaper.

The man caught Mr. Perry's eye, laid down his copy of the *Times* very deliberately, and, with an unobtrusive, cathedral sort of gesture towards the green, printed label on Mr. Perry's suitcase, said:

"I perceive that you too, sir, are going to Wonderland."

At this moment the train took its cue and, like Alice, plunged into a tunnel. The clattering din precluded conversation, so that Mr. Perry was free to analyse the tones in which that monumental figure had addressed him. They had been solemn and portentous as those of a whole Dean and Chapter discussing the question of grouting the East tower: at the same time there was something behind them—not quite servility, but the smooth, professional respectfulness of the upper servant. Perhaps he is somebody's butler, thought Mr. Perry; but it's rather surprising that a butler should be going to Wonderland, and in those Throgmorton Street clothes; and one doesn't somehow associate butlers with cute blonde daughters. Still, there's no law of nature against butlers reproducing the species.

The train burst out into the dazzling sunlight again.

"You are to be with us for some time, sir?" inquired the man.

"A fortnight, probably. It depends——" Mr. Perry broke off, not wishing to say that it depended on how long his work would take. People did not normally go to Wonderland to work.

"In that case, if you will permit the liberty——"

Mr. Perry glanced at the visiting-card the man tendered him. *"Mr. James Thistlethwaite, 29 St. Petrock's Street, Oxford,"* it stated noncommittally.

"And this is Mrs. Thistlethwaite," the man continued, with the voice of a head verger pointing out the figures in a twelfth century stained-glass window. "And my daughter, Sally."

Sally Thistlethwaite glanced up from a photograph of Robert Taylor, nodded coolly, and occupied herself with *Film Frolics* again. It was the kind of look Mr. Perry was quite used to getting from blondes in tobacco kiosks: a large Players and that will be all, it stated in unequivocal terms.

But to-day, for no apparent reason, it irked him to be dismissed with one glance. He replied, more aggressively than was his habit:

"My dossier is as follows: Name, Paul Perry. Age, twenty-five. Unmarried. Educated, St. Bees, and Peterhouse, Cambridge."

Sally glanced up at him again, slightly puzzled. Her father, however, did not appear discomposed by Paul's abruptness. He nodded benignly.

"A University man. Quite so. The stamp is unmistakable. Even at Cambridge. And your occupation, sir? No," he wheezed, holding up a fat hand, "don't tell me. Let me see, now." He measured Paul with a grave, curiously alert eye.

"Mr. Thistlethwaite is a great judge of character," said his wife comfortably. "You mustn't mind him."

"Grey flannel trousers, good quality cloth, not kept in a press, though, I fear. Shirt with collar attached. Sports jacket, ready-made," murmured the fat man, as if communing with himself. Paul Perry blushed and, catching a subdued merriment in Sally's eye, blushed more angrily still.

"The normal working attire of the schoolmaster," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But I observe the elbows are not unduly worn, though the jacket has seen considerable wear. No sitting at a desk, we may deduce: therefore not a schoolmaster. A journalist, perhaps. The pencils in the breast pocket. Bulge in right-hand side pocket. Might be a reporter's notebook. I——"

"You're embarrassing the gentleman, daddy. Isn't he, my pet?" exclaimed the girl Sally.

"Not in the least," said Paul stiffly. "As it happens, I'm a scientist. A scientist of a sort, that is."

"What sort? D'you carve up guinea-pigs, my pet?"

"Sally, you should not call strange gentlemen your pet in a railway carriage," protested Mrs. Thistlethwaite unconvincingly. "Please forgive her, Mr. Er. She's that impulsive."

"Not at all," Mr. Perry said. "I'm a field-worker, as a matter of fact."

Sally opened her eyes wide. They were remarkably pretty eyes. "A field-worker," she said. "Oo-er. Artificial manures, I suppose. Well, every one to his taste."

"Sally, that will be enough," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "The scientist is the benefactor of humanity. Several of my gentlemen have chosen that walk of life. Artificial manures are of incalculable service to the agriculturist, and the land to-day is——"

"But I've nothing to do with artificial manures," exclaimed Paul a little desperately. "Why you should think . . ." His voice tailed off, for he became aware of Mr. Thistlethwaite's eye fixed, with a somewhat censorious expression, upon his neck.

"What's the matter?" he asked. "Haven't I washed my neck this morning?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised a shocked hand. "Please, sir. Please. No, I was referring to the lapel. Just a leetle too broad, wouldn't you say, sir? A trifle outré? Where, if I may make so bold, did you purchase the garment?"

"In Cambridge. Why?"

"Ah, I thought so. Well, youth may perhaps be permitted a little excess, a certain rodomontade of attire, if I may so express myself. The garment does not become you ill, sir. Though, as I always tell my own gentlemen, a gentleman should wear a suit if he wishes to look distinguished in the quadrangle."

"You're connected with the university?" asked Paul, who had now decided that his vis-à-vis must be a college servant.

"We have that honour, sir. For the last hundred and fifty years we have had that honour."

"Indeed? A hundred and fifty years? You'll be thinking of retiring soon, I suppose?" replied Paul, bemused by the apparently royal use of the "we."

"I alluded to my firm," said Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity.

Sally glanced up, giggling pleasantly. "Come off it, daddy. Mr. Perry's just itching to know what it's all about. Daddy keeps a shop," she explained.

An expression of horror convulsed her father's huge face at this meiosis. "A shop! My dear! Please! An establishment."

"I've got it," said Paul. "You're a tailor."

"A master tailor," amended Mr. Thistlethwaite, recovering his poise. "Very sharp of you, sir. It is easy to see that you are a scientist. Observation and analysis. I myself, in my amateur way, am a dabbler in science. Criminology, to be specific." He whipped out a luridly-covered book from behind his back. It was entitled *The Body in the Bassinet.* "A very pretty little problem. It was recommended to me by one of my late gentlemen—no less a person than Lord Hugh Willoughby."

"Good gracious, do you read that sort of stuff? Why?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite directed an overwhelming, Johnsonian gaze upon Paul. "I read them, sir, because I take pleasure in them. Intellectual pleasure, sir."

"Mr. Perry's a high-brow, I expect," said Sally, very much up in arms. "Spends all his time reading about phosphates."

"My good girl," retorted Paul, "a high-brow is only a person with a heightened awareness of life. The infant, when he first uses his fingers to grasp an orange and transfer it to his mouth, is a high-brow. The——"

"Do we pay at the door, professor, or will you be sending round a plate?"

Paul gave her a look. It was no good, though; the young woman was quite impossible. Pert, semi-educated, low intelligence quotient. A type interesting enough objectively as a subject of research, but its individual members of no importance. Mr. Perry docketed her in his mind and pushed the file well out of sight, unaware that—like her father—Sally was no type, but a genuine original character. Indeed, Mr. Perry did not really hold with "characters"; they had a habit of upsetting both one's equanimity and one's statistics.

"This is your first visit to Wonderland?" Mr. Thistlethwaite was inquiring.

"Yes."

"I hope it may come up to your expectations. Mrs. Thistlethwaite and I spent a very pleasant fortnight there last year. I myself," he added coyly, "had the satisfaction of winning the Beetle Drive."

"Indeed? You astonish me."

"Every taste in recreation is catered for. You yourself, sir, are perhaps a cricketer?"

"No. No, I'm not."

"Never mind," Sally interposed darkly. "There'll probably be a Knock-Knees competition."

Paul turned, in a marked manner, to his *New Statesman.* After a while, the train was climbing and twisting through a landscape of small green hills, pastures and unkempt hedgerows. At the junction they got out and boarded another, smaller train, which puffed cheerfully towards Wonderland. Paul was thinking of the task ahead of him. If he carried it out successfully, the Chief might find him a permanent place in the organisation. But it was nearly all voluntary work, and the legacy his aunt had left him would not last much longer. He began to run over in his mind the system on which he would work: it depended in the last resort, of course, upon the local conditions, but there was no harm in having the general line of activity plotted out . . .

The train halted abruptly at a small station in a deep combe. They all got out. Mr. Thistlethwaite, taking Paul by the arm, led him aside and whispered coyly:

"If you will be so good, sir—do not mention the nature of my profession when we get there. I am holidaying incognito, so to say. In Wonderland we have no class distinctions, of course; but it will preclude any possibility of embarrassment on the part of some of our fellow-visitors, if they remain unaware of my—how shall I put it?—more fortunate social status. Let us enter as equals this true democracy of holiday-makers."

The extraordinary man bowed gravely, removed a speck of fluff from Paul's collar, and waddled off towards the station yard, where a bright green bus, with *Wonderland* written on its side, awaited them. An attendant, dressed in bright green livery, was piling the luggage on top of the bus. Paul, who had lingered outside to study his fellow-visitors, finally entered the bus and secured the last available seat. At this moment, Sally Thistlethwaite walked down the gangway and stopped beside him.

"Rush hour," she said.

Paul indicated, with rather ill grace, that she could have his seat.

"I wouldn't disturb you for worlds," she said. Then, with a mischievous curl of her lip: "I'll sit on your lap, my pet."

"I would prefer to stand," retorted young Mr. Perry coldly.

"Oh, well, have it your own way. It's not every day you have a pretty girl asking to sit on your knee, though, I bet."

Paul moved forward, took up his stand where he could see ahead through the glass partition at the front of the bus. They careered along narrow lanes, past farms sheltered under the lee of the hills, then climbed a steep gradient till they attained a hilltop from which a great panorama of cliff and sea spread out. The line of cliffs, curving in from the distance, was golden from the evening sun: the inshore sea held the purple bloom of grapes. But it was not at sea or cliffs that young Mr. Perry was gazing with such satisfaction and excitement. His eyes were attracted by the huge white streamer, *Welcome to Wonderland,* that made an archway for the bus, and the spectacle of Wonderland itself displayed down there along the cliff-top between the hill and the sea.

Chapter II

The core and centre-piece of Wonderland was a huge white building, modernist in design, flat-roofed. Its walls seemed to be made of glass, so great was the extent of its windows, and this gave the severe lines a not ungraceful look of insubstantiality, as though at any moment it might open great white wings and float off into the summer blue. The side which faced the sea curved in a semi-circle, so that it commanded a wide prospect to south, west and east. A balcony overhung from the top storey on this side, curving like the bridge of a liner: it was, in fact, called "The Captain's bridge" by the habitués of Wonderland.

Young Mr. Perry gazed his fill upon this edifice, and found it good. Good, not only for its hygienic-factory lines, but because of what it stood for. It stood for Organised Recreation, with the accent on the "organised": and anything that was efficiently organised was O.K. by Paul Perry. Within that massive fun-factory (so a careful study of the brochure issued by Wonderland Ltd. Holiday Camp had informed him) were vast dining-halls where ravenous visitors could partake of epicurean meals cooked by London chefs in hygienic kitchens and served on spotless napery by cheerful waitresses to the accompaniment of a string band: there was also a ballroom, whose sprung maple floor positively incited you to the light fantastic; to say nothing of bars, an indoor swimming-bath equipped with Aerofilter and coloured fountains, a concert hall, a gymnasium, and innumerable playrooms.

The general impression derived from this brochure was that, if you could not enjoy yourself at Wonderland, you were past praying for. And Wonderland was evidently determined to make you enjoy yourself there, even if you had to perish from a surfeit of recreation in the process. As the bus drew to a standstill outside the main building, several men and women approached it, smiling hospitably but purposefully. The men wore green sweaters with a white letter W upon them, and white flannel trousers; the women, green jerseys and short white skirts. In a moment each of the new batch of visitors had a numbered green disc pinned on him, and they were led off in groups to the chalets where they would be sleeping.

The Thistlethwaite family were evidently going to be near neighbours of Paul. As he trailed along behind them, he heard Sally say to her mother, in a voice—for her—strangely subdued:

"Did you see Rip Van Winkle up there?"

"Rip Van——? No, dear."

"In that copse, beside the road, just before the bus turned into the grounds. He shook his fist at me. Darling, he really did look rather awful. Just his head was showing, above a bush. He had a long grey beard. I thought it was part of the bush at first."

"What you need is a nice, hot drink, my love. Why, you're trembling. You haven't caught a chill, have you?"

"But, mummy, I *saw* him. He seemed to be looking straight into my eyes as we passed by. And he shook his fist at me."

"We must tell your father about it," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite. "He'll see that it doesn't happen again. It was just a tramp, I expect."

Paul Perry, who was looking with interest at the row of chalets, green-painted and pleasantly set amidst groups of trees, only gave half an ear to this conversation. He was to be reminded of it, however, before long, and in a disagreeable manner.

For the present, he was occupied by the sensation, part bewilderment, part timidity, which comes over any but the stoutest spirit when he is about to enter a community of unknown people, himself unknown to them. It was like the first day at a public school, thought Paul. This impression was heightened by the athletic attire of the professional hosts and hostesses, and the groups of young people who were strolling about everywhere, laughing among themselves, so plainly knowing the ropes—five hundred of them the place could accommodate, for Wonderland was the biggest, brightest, most ambitious of all the holiday camps that had sprung up over England during the last year or two.

Paul closed the door of his chalet, and unpacked with the forlorn gloom of a new boy on the first day of term arranging his few possessions in his locker. The luxuriant Sleepeesi mattress wooing the tired reveller into the arms of Morpheus, the water (H. and C.), the electric light, hanging wardrobe and 100% damp-proof walls—all extolled in the Wonderland Ltd. brochure—failed to drive away Paul's blues. Luxury, indeed, though he approved of it on principle provided it was put within the reach of the masses, had a certain disquieting effect upon him. He was not for nothing the son of an Evangelical minister, brought up in a harsh, poverty-stricken north-country town.

"Mr. Perry? Good. Settling in all right?"

The young man who had knocked at the chalet door was tall, broad, and tanned a gorgeous mahogany, like an advertisement out of *Esquire.*

"I'm the games organiser," he added. "Name of Wise. My step-brother's the resident manager."

"Edward Wise? The rugger blue?"

"Yes. I used to play a bit," said the gorgeous young man, with what seemed to Paul the most offensive false modesty.

"You were up at Cambridge just before me, then. And your brother's the manager? All one big, happy family here."

"We aim to give you a home from home, set in sylvan surroundings beside the sparkling waves. See our brochure."

"You've certainly got a nice little place here."

"Not too dusty. Well, I suppose you'll be clocking in at the Reception. Eight pip-emma. Hallo," said Mr. Wise, noticing Paul's note-books which were piled on the chest of drawers. "You an author? I say, not so bad. Never met a live author before. Down here for local colour?"

"Something of the sort," replied Paul mendaciously. He was not unmoved by the evident respect which had come into the athlete's voice. His pleasure was shortlived. Edward Wise, who had moved to the door, exclaimed:

"Hallo, hallo, hallo! If it isn't our Sal! Back amongst the hectic pleasure-seekers again, Sally?"

"How are you, Teddy?"

"Full of oats, midear, full of oats. I say, you're in distinguished company. Celebrated author in our midst. Name of Perry. You'll have to watch your step, midear."

"Perry?" Paul could hear her saying. "But that's the man we travelled down on the train with. He said he was a scientist."

"Ah. Pulling your leg. Mystery man."

"Well, I don't know. He's a high-brow, anyway——"

"Moderate the voice, Sally. The gentleman's just down this street."

"I say, Teddy, talking of mystery men, have you seen an old guy with a beard a mile long in the wood up there?"

"Beard? Oh, that must be old Ishmael. Sort of hermit idea. Quite harmless, but he doesn't like us very much. Wasn't in residence last time you came, I believe. He——"

Paul could not follow the rest of this interesting conversation, for the two moved away out of earshot. The girl had quite a pleasing voice, he reflected: deep, liquid, faintly countrified in accent. Pity she had nothing in her head. Edward Wise he dismissed as the normal, hearty type: common as blackberries at Cambridge: potentially, no doubt, the Enemy—but with a little diplomacy you could get them eating out of your hand. He wondered what Wise did in the winter months when the camp was closed, and jotted down a memo in the note-book marked Q (for Queries).

Presently, taking off his tie and turning his shirt-collar down over his coat ("protective colouring" was the way he put it to himself), Paul wandered out to take the air before dinner. A huge figure, resplendent in white drill suit, Panama hat, and what appeared to be a M.C.C. tie, bore down upon him.

"Salubrious air, sir," boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite. "Putting colour in those cheeks already. May we have the honour of including you at our table, sir? Very congenial company you will find it, I venture to say. Interesting material, too, for a gentleman of the pen. Ah, yes," he continued, silencing Paul's protest with a rogueish finger. "My daughter told me. Have no fear, sir. Like myself, you prefer to be incognito. Very natural. Very proper. A chiel amang us taking notes."

Paul had no very keen desire for Mr. Thistlethwaite as a permanent mess-mate during his stay at Wonderland: but the prospect of sitting down to table with a number of total strangers, though professionally suitable enough, intimidated him more than he would have cared to say. Paul Perry was still pretty new to his job. So he accepted Mr. Thistlethwaite's offer, and together they strolled towards the great white building from which the sound of a deep gong reverberated.

" 'The clamorous harbinger of victuals,' " quoted Mr. Thistlethwaite. "You will find the table modest, sir, but not unpalatable. They keep a very tolerable cellar. I fancy we might broach a bottle to launch our—ah—pleasure cruise. . . ."

"I can't think how they do it on £3 10. 0. a week," Paul was saying twenty minutes later to his left-hand neighbour, a small, tubby, beaming man with gold-rimmed pince-nez. They had eaten through two excellent courses, and there was still Crême brulé, cheese and coffee to come.

"Wonderful, isn't it?" replied the small man. "Organisation, of course. Mind you, they put on specially good grub for the Saturday dinner, because new-comers generally turn up to-day. But £3 10. 0. inclusive of everything—all the fun of the fair, as you might say—that's good going." He blinked rapidly several times, then murmured to Paul out of the corner of his mouth, with an absurd air of self-importance, "Shouldn't be surprised if they aren't losing money over it. I'm told they're out to knock out Beale Bay—that's the holiday camp farther down the coast. Competition's pretty fierce, you can bet. If we saw the balance sheet, we'd find the Wonderland people had cut profits down to the bone, anyway."

"Well, that's their look-out, isn't it? Lowers the cost of luxury for us poor holiday-makers, so we won't complain."

"What? Yes, oh yes, I see what you mean," said the small man. He had an anxious way of listening to you, Paul noticed—head slightly on one side, eyes peering up through the pince-nez—as though what you said might contain some clue that would turn out a matter of life and death for him.

"Mind you," he went on, lowering his voice again, "the cheap tariff here—well, it means that you get rather a mixed crowd. At Bognor, now——"

"Sir," interrupted Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had overheard this sentiment, "do you suggest that the amenities of civilisation should not be open to all alike, from the highest in the land to the humblest?"

"Oh, indeed no, I certainly didn't. I——"

"You will concur with me, as a"—here Mr. Thistlethwaite winked ponderously at Paul—"as a scientist, Mr. Perry, that science should benefit all equally."

"It would be nice if it did."

"Quite so. Your sentiments, Mr. Morley, were illiberal, to say the least."

"Now, daddy, you mustn't bully Albert," said Sally. "Albert, my pet, don't listen to him. He's just practising speeches for when he's a town councillor."

Albert Morley gave Sally a look of almost dog-like gratitude. She smiled back at him kindly. She had dark eyebrows and eyelashes, Paul noticed for the first time: they gave a certain vivacity, he admitted, to a blonde type which would otherwise be quite conventional and insipid. Catching his glance, she said to him coolly:

"*As a scientist,* Mr. Perry, you must think us a very low-brow, dull lot here. Funny place for *you* to come for a holiday."

"A scientist is always on the look-out for specimens," Paul replied, giving back her haughty gaze with interest. If she was determined to make unprovoked war on him, war she should have.

"The back-chat king," said Sally, turning her shoulder upon him.

Paul looked round the tables at what Mr. Morley had called "a mixed crowd." Young people, for the most part. From the £150 to the £300 income groups, he imagined: that could be verified later by taking a cross-section. Quite a number of older men and women, though: brought their children, no doubt: the children had a special supper at 6. Many of the girls wore evening frocks, in readiness for the dancing. Flannel suits predominated among the males: the faces, like the suits, were spruce, showy, cut to a pattern. There was no doubt that the visitors were enjoying themselves: far more animation than you would get a seaside boarding-house, thought Paul, remembering with a shudder those boyhood holidays in grim *pensions* at Scarborough or Skegness.

Two sides of this restaurant were occupied by glass windows almost from floor to ceiling: the other walls looked like unstained oak, but were probably faked pitch-pine. The chairs were imitation Spanish style, quite well padded. Flowers and electric-light standards decorated the tables, which seated anything from two to a dozen people. Some of the visitors, Paul noticed, seemed a little subdued by the unusual luxury of their surroundings: these, no doubt, were new arrivals who had never been to such a camp before. On the whole, though, it was evident that they took to what Mr. Thistlethwaite called "the amenities of civilisation" like ducks to water. He wanted to ask someone whether this short, annual brush with "the amenities" dissatisfied people with the drabness of their own homes; but he feared lest the question might bring down on his head some crushing, Johnsonian rebuke from Mr. Thistlethwaite who, under the influence of good wine and the holiday spirit, was growing more democratic every minute.

Yes, the Wonderland Thistlethwaite was noticeably different from the fellow-traveller of a few hours ago, just as that fellow-traveller no doubt differed markedly from the tailor of Oxford. Environment conditions personality, said Paul Perry to himself: like many of his age, he had a weakness for generalisations with a scientific smack about them.

After dinner was over, Mr. Thistlethwaite suggested that they should take the air on "the Captain's bridge" until it was time to enter the concert hall for the Reception ceremony. Albert Morley trotted upstairs in their wake. It was he who pointed out to Paul the sights that could be seen from the balcony, which indeed commanded a superb prospect of the sea and of the coast to east and west. With a proprietary, but faintly anxious pride, as of a father introducing his children to a rich, capricious relative, Mr. Morley called Paul's attention to the sunset, a passing freighter, an old smugglers' cove, the section of cliff that concealed the naval port of Applestock—their nearest town.

"I wanted to join the navy myself, when I was a nipper: but my eyesight——" said Mr. Morley, peering up into Paul's face. "I remember my dad taking me on a steamer down the Thames. It was the August Bank Holiday of 1913—or was it 1912?—I can't remember now. We passed the warehouses, down Limehouse way, and he told me—my dad was in the coastal trade, you see—that in the old days you could smell the spices in the warehouses right across the river. From the East, they brought them.

I fancied to myself I could smell them even then. Of course, I'd wanted to be a sailor long before that, but it brought it home, somehow. I went into a shipping office. It was the next best thing, if you take my meaning."

Mr. Morley broke off, blushing a little. Oh, hell, thought Paul. Am I going to have this little bore attached to me for the duration? He was embarrassed by this disclosure of Albert Morley's fantasy-life, and ashamed of his embarrassment.

"What's that?" he asked, pointing to a section of the balcony that was shut off from the rest by a glass partition.

"That's Captain Wise's private end of the bridge. Captain Mortimer Wise. He's the resident manager. You'll be seeing him shortly in the concert hall, when he receives the guests. A very pleasant-spoken gentleman. Wonderful organiser."

The resident manager. I could get a good deal of the information I want from him, thought Paul: if he's not too busy. Should I take him into my confidence at the start? Better wait and see what he's like.

"Time to be going below," said Mr. Thistlethwaite, who had been standing a little apart from them on the bridge, breathing stertorously, and waving his arms in strange gestures like a lunatic signaller. "The ozone here, sir, is incomparable," he explained. " 'Mens sana in corpore sano,' as the Latin poet has it."

The concert hall was already almost full. Although this was ostensibly a reception for the new-comers, every one was going—as Edward Wise had phrased it—to clock in. The Wonderlanders were evidently a gregarious lot. This pleased Paul, who on principle approved of mass movements, and could quote chapter and verse from certain modern authors to condemn the detached, the solitary, the bird-watcher, the secret vice of romantic isolation.

"Holds five hundred, this hall does," whispered Albert Morley with timid pride. "You wait till the fun starts. That young Mr. Wise—he's a card."

Paul began to feel a trifle apprehensive. Wait till the fun starts. It sounded ominously like the initiation ceremony of a savage tribe. Not that one didn't approve of Malinowski, and all that.

The green-and-white clad officials of the camp now filed on to the platform amid applause, and took their seats on a crescent of chairs. The staff at prize-giving, talking among themselves, elaborately unconscious of those in the body of the hall. Now it's the cue for the headmaster to appear. Louder applause. Captain Wise, carrying a sheaf of papers, came to the front of the platform. Considerably older than his step-brother.

Smaller. The same square shape of head. The professional look, worried but infinitely capable, of the organiser. No nonsense about him.

"I won't keep you long," he said. "We welcome you to Wonderland. We hope you'll all have a good time. My assistants and I are here to make sure that you have it. You'll find a time-table of the week's activities on the notice board in the entrance hall. I'm sure you'll all find something to your taste there. But don't think you've got to go in for any of these competitions and things if you don't want to. We have no compulsory games at Wonderland." (Mild applause: the public school reference is slightly above their heads, thought Paul.)

"We try to have a minimum of rules. We rely on your co-operation, and you've never let us down. The chief of them is, no noise in the camp after 1 a.m. The ladies need their beauty sleep." (Laughter and protests.) "And, of course, no rowdiness. Our expert gang of chuckers-out——" (Captain Wise indicated the row of officials behind him: cheers and laughter: he's a good psychologist, thought Paul—knows how to jolly them along, without being false-hearty.) "If you've any complaints, great or small, any suggestions for improving the place, bring 'em to me or one of the staff. We're always on tap. And don't forget to book early for next year's visit: we've had to turn away over two hundred applications this summer. Well, I'll hand you over now to the tender mercies of the games organiser. Teddy, step forward. Cheerio, everybody."

Edward Wise took the floor. There was a perceptible stir among the female section of the audience.

"Hi-ya, boys and girls," he cried.

"Hi-ya, Teddy," the cry went back.

"Before we have a spot of community singing, let's loosen up on the old war-cry. Won-der-land, hi-yi-yi. Gently at first. Gently does it. Let her go."

The war-cry was repeated twenty times, each syllable strongly stressed, in a whisper at first, then louder and faster till it reached the hysterical pitch of the Sieg Heils at a Nazi congress.

Paul Perry was both fascinated and horrified. His fastidious soul was intensely embarrassed by the proceedings. The synthetic American accent, like a dance-band leader's, which had replaced Edward Wise's normal tones, the slick, confident gestures with which he conducted the war-cry—these were vastly repugnant to Paul. But, as a dispassionate observer, he could not fail to be interested; while, as one who approved of mass production on principle, he had to approve this curious, machine-like production of mass sound. And not mass sound only. Mass emotion was being stirred, the Wonderland visitors were being welded into a Wonderland community—a great pleasure-unit with a single voice. Mr. Thistlethwaite, bellowing rhythmically at his side, no longer seemed a ridiculous figure. Paul himself was soon chanting away with the best of them. When the war-cry had ended in a final clap of thunder, they all turned to each other, laughing, happy—or, as Paul would have preferred to put it, their inhibitions liquidated.

Paul, indeed, was so carried out of himself that, when Teddy Wise called for members of the audience to come forward as voluntary sports organisers, to assist the Wonderland staff, he surprised himself by being one of the first to volunteer. Sally Thistlethwaite's sceptical glance only confirmed him in his resolution.

After half an hour of community singing, most of the guests moved over to the dance hall. As soon as the band struck up, Paul went up to Sally and her mother, and asked Mrs. Thistlethwaite for the first dance. The matron demurred, beamed with pleasure, was finally persuaded. That'll show her, thought Paul, glancing coolly at Sally as he took her mother on to the floor. He knew he danced well.

The dance had been in progress for about an hour when a spotlight number was put on. By tacit consent, only the best dancers took part in this. Paul had boldly asked one of the staff to partner him—a slinky brunette who turned out to be Miss Jones, the resident manager's secretary. Not more than a dozen couples were on the floor, moving to a slow fox-trot, each couple picked out in turn by the spotlight as they glided round smoothly preoccupied, like fish in some submarine grotto. Paul hoped that Sally Thistlethwaite was watching: he held Miss Jones closer as the spotlight came down on them. They seemed all alone, cut off by the sword of light from the onlookers and the other dancers. He became aware that the dancing couples had thinned out. Presently he felt a tap on his shoulder.

"This is where we get off," said Miss Jones. "Well done, partner."

"But I—why should we?"

Miss Jones explained. The band leader had been eliminating one couple after another as they passed the platform, till only the best pair of dancers was left. Paul hardly listened to her explanation. He was watching the last couple left—Sally Thistlethwaite moving like silk, like running water, in the arms of Edward Wise, the spotlight bathing them in a shaft of changing colour. Damn her, thought Paul with a viciousness that startled him. Damn them both!

It was a few seconds after this that the voice came through the loudspeakers—a strained, metallic, squeaky voice that rasped against the quiet rhythm of the band.

"Watch out for the Mad Hatter, boys and girls," it said.

Sally felt a slight check in Teddy Wise's step, a momentary tightening of his fingers on her wrist.

"What's all this?" she asked, as they moved to the last few bars of the music. "A new competition, or something?"

"Er, yes. Yes, that's it," replied Teddy. "A sort of crazy competition."

"Oh, do tell me all about it."

But the music came to its close with a dying clash on the cymbal, all the lights went up, and the onlookers began to applaud Teddy and Sally as they stood, blinking in the glare, smiling at each other vaguely, as if awakened from a deep sleep.

Chapter III

The next morning was Sunday. After breakfast, together with a considerable body of the Wonderlanders, Paul trooped down to bathe in the sea. The path took them along the cliff for a hundred yards, then zigzagged down the face of the cliff where many years ago there had been a big landslide. This now offered a declivity tangled with bushes and trees, through which glimpses of the sea below could be caught. The bathers, scrambling down this path in single file, gay in their coloured bath-robes, resembled—Paul thought—a procession of pilgrims descending towards some sea-shrine. He gave the Wonderland company full marks for not having replaced the path by concrete steps or the wilderness by formal terrraces. The animation, giggling and mild horseplay, the sense of adventure, too, which this wild path aroused, fully justified their leaving it in a state of nature.

"Look out, Sally," he exclaimed suddenly to the girl, who was clambering down the path in front of him.

"What's the matter?"

"Didn't you see him? Just over there behind that bush? Old Rip Van Winkle, it was."

"Ooh!" Sally shrank back, clutching the side of his coat. "Where? I can't see anything."

"It's all right. I was only pulling your leg."

"Well, you *are* mean! It's no joke, believe me. If you'd seen him. Hey, wait a minute. Who told *you* about Rip Van?"

"I heard you talking to your mother yesterday evening. And then to our Dictator of Athletics."

"Dictator of——? Oh, you mean Teddy. I do believe you're jealous. Golly, it's human after all!"

They were moving on again, and Paul's remarks had to be addressed to the girl's back, which somehow took the edge off them.

"Don't you ever think about anything except trousers?" he asked coldly.

"Never. I'm just a stupid, frivolous girl. Not at all your type, I'm afraid. It's rather a pity. You don't look so bad, now you've taken those pansy, horn-rimmed spectacles off."

"Thanks for the testimonial. You're not unattractive yourself, when you forget that you're trying to be something out of a film weekly."

"Do you make a habit of listening-in to other people's conversations?"

"What on earth——?"

"You know quite well. Me and Teddy talking about Rip Van Winkle."

"You shouldn't talk so shrilly if you don't want people to overhear your confidential chats with your young men."

"He's not—I—really, you do get in my hair. Just a common snoop is what you are, Mr. Paul Perry. Perry spelt P-r-y, I suppose. Yes, I shall call you Paul Pry in future, my pet."

"You'd better not. And what did your young man tell you about Rip Van Winkle, anyway?"

"Never you mind. You're too young. And, if you call him my young man again, I'll get him to bust you in the nose."

"Yes, I can see you'd like that. The alluring little piece, with two great big he-men fighting over her."

"He-men? Don't speak for yourself, Paul Pry. I could knock you cold myself, I believe. I've learnt boxing."

"That must account for your over-developed arms. Like bolsters, they are."

"Go away. I hate you."

Paul derived a certain pleasure from this swapping of back-chat. There was the holiday feeling, the irresponsibility of indulging in a conversation which at other times one would have condemned as vulgar, dull and below one's standards. There was also the pleasure of finding that one could hold one's own at this kind of badinage. Paul's work had brought him into contact with many people who talked in this way, certainly: theoretically, he knew the argot backwards, but this was the first time he had practised it.

So, at least, he reasoned with himself, as he negotiated the last fifty yards of the cliff path. He would have been surprised to know what Sally was thinking at this moment. What a queer young man, she was thinking, and what a funny, pompous way he talks. I suppose that's the way clever people talk; it's rather attractive, really; no, it isn't, he's a hateful creature—saying my arms were too fat—I hate him. Paul would have been even more shocked if someone had told him that the real reason why he had enjoyed the exchanges with Sally was nothing more complex or recherché than that he was physically attracted by her. He could speak scientifically and at great length about sex attraction and sex antagonism: what he could not do was to recognise them when he met them in person.

The Wonderland private bathing beach lay in a cove between two small headlands. Under the limestone cliffs, the beach was flat and sandy; farther down it shelved sharply towards the sea, so that bathers soon found themselves out of their depth. Some rafts were moored about fifty yards from the shore, and already a number of visitors were diving from these or paddling about on brightly-coloured floats. On the flat part of the beach a game had been started. A ring of young men and girls were throwing a beach-ball across, which a man in the middle tried to intercept. The "he," Paul saw as he came closer, was Albert Morley. His pince-nez were off, he was beaming and making the most ludicrous attempts to catch the ball, jumping up and down like a frog on a hot plate.

Who started it, Paul could not be quite sure. He fancied it was Edward Wise, though, who first deliberately threw the ball so that it struck little Mr. Morley and bounced off him back to the circle again. At any rate, it became infectious. Instead of throwing the ball past Albert or over his head, they all began to fling it at him, shrieking with laughter, flinging the ball harder and harder till the little man was trying to dodge it instead of catching it—and with no greater success. He was still beaming, though, taking it all in good part, but with the uncertain expression of one who is not quite sure whether a joke has not turned against him.

Paul became aware of Sally at his side. She was breathing hard, her eyes flashing.

"They're baiting him. It's not fair," she said. "Go and stop them, Paul. Please."

Some perverse impulse, which he heartily regretted a moment later, made him say, "Why should I? I'm not a policeman."

"Oh, you're too damned marvellous to be alive," the girl exclaimed, and hurried off towards the circle of players.

But Mortimer Wise, who was strolling about in his bathing-dress, got there first.

"Hey, hey!" he called good-humouredly, breaking into the circle. "Let someone else have a turn in the middle, Mr. Morley." He took the ball, pushed his step-brother into the centre, and flung the ball neatly past his left hand.

Paul saw Albert Morley emerge through the circle, which had grown suddenly subdued, rubbing his eyes. For a horrible moment he thought the little man was crying. Then Albert said:

"It's the sand in my eyes. Off that ball."

Sally took out a handkerchief, put one hand on Mr. Morley's shoulder, and worked the sand out of his eyes for him. Watching her, Paul felt a real pang of humiliation. Her body, in the white bathing-suit, was beautifully formed: the tenderness in her attitude made him feel alone and resentful. He walked down to the sea, and swam out.

It was ten minutes later, not far from a throng of splashing, shrieking bathers, that Sally Thistlethwaite suddenly threw up her hands, opened her mouth, and disappeared under the water. They assumed she was just ragging about. But she was a long time reappearing; and, when she did, her face was white and she was trying to scream through the water that choked her throat. As she went under again, Paul was not far from her. But Edward Wise had seen it too, and his racing stroke brought him more quickly to where the girl had gone under. He dived, to emerge presently on his back, his hands under Sally's shoulders, and towed her towards the shore. In a moment, Captain Wise was by his side, helping him. Some distance behind they were followed by Albert Morley, Paul noticed, swimming a desperate breast-stroke that gave the impression of a bicyclist in a very low gear, a comical look of consternation on his face.

By the time Paul reached land, Sally was sitting up between the two brothers, coughing out sea-water and saying:

"I'm sorry. I lost my head. Some silly ass ducked me and held me under a bit too long. When I came up again, I sort of couldn't keep up. I'm quite all right now. Really."

A small crowd had assembled round them. Captain Wise motioned them away, saying, "It's all right. No damage done."

But, when the crowd had dispersed, he turned to Sally with a serious expression.

"You didn't notice who it was, I suppose? We don't want that kind of thing happening here."

"No. I'm afraid not. Someone clutched my ankles and pulled me under and held me there."

"Didn't you struggle with him? Was it a man or a woman?"

"I don't know. A man, I suppose. The hands felt big. I couldn't get at him. He kept below me, somehow."

"Well, if you're quite sure you're all right——" Captain Wise moved away, beckoning his brother to follow him. Paul overheard him say, "It's probably nothing but a silly prank. Still, keep an eye out, Teddy, will you?"—and then something Paul could not catch.

"If I catch the joker, I'll give him something to take home," said Teddy angrily.

"Oh, no, no. The customer is always right, within limits. Keep the strong-arm stuff to yourself, my boy. We'll give the chap a warning, if we catch him."

But they did not catch him. Far from it. In spite of Teddy Wise's vigilance, two more duckings took place in the next hour. One victim was Albert Morley, the other no less a person than the resident manager himself. Neither of them received as severe a ducking as Sally; but Mortimer Wise, at least, was very angry. Not only angry, Paul observed, but worried. He saw him take his brother aside; and shortly after, Teddy fished pencil and paper from his blazer pocket, and was evidently putting down the names of every one who left the beach.

There must have been nearly a hundred bathers there, many of whom were still unaware that anything out of the ordinary had taken place—apart from what had happened to Sally. They were not to remain long in ignorance, however.

Paul went back to the chalets with Mr. Thistlethwaite, who showed no signs of his long immersion, though for the best part of an hour he had been floating on his back, very high in the water, like a freighter in ballast.

"Mark my words, Mr. Perry," he said, when they had attained the cliff top, "something is afoot."

"These duckings, d'you mean? Surely it's just some practical joker. He'll try it on once too often, and get caught, and be asked to leave the camp. That's all there is to it."

Mr. Thistlethwaite gave him a look of extraordinary significance, sighed dramatically, and said:

"I wish I could think it, sir. I am singularly succeptible to atmosphere, though. And I contend that all is not well with the atmosphere of Wonderland. The tone, as you might say."

"Did you notice it as soon as you arrived?"

"No, sir. I noticed it first at precisely six minutes past ten last night."

"Six minutes past ten? Why, what——?"

"If you will cast your mind back to the events of last night, sir, you will remember that the spotlight dance began at ten of the clock. Just before the dance ended, a certain announcement was made over the loudspeakers. At ten-six, the lights went up."

"Well?"

"You did not observe the expression on the faces of the staff—the dance-band leader, the hosts and hostesses, young Mr. Edward Wise, for instance?"

"No, I can't say I did particularly. I'd been dancing with Miss Jones. She looked normal enough, as far as I remember."

"The expression I noted, sir," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite, in his most grandiose manner, "was one of dubiety—I might almost say of puzzlement." He advanced his huge face close to Paul's. "What deductions may we draw from that?"

"I'm trying to remember what the announcement was. Oh, I've got it. Something about a Mad Hatter."

"The allusion is to a fictitious character in a children's book entitled *Alice in Wonderland,* by the late Mr. Dodgson, of Christ Church. My firm had the honour of supplying him with a dozen shirts once."

"Yes, I had grasped that much. But I don't see——"

"The point is, sir, that the staff were taken aback by the announcement. The generality assumed it referred to some forthcoming competition. The staff evidently knew of no such competition. We may deduce, therefore, that some unauthorised person obtained access to the microphone under cover of darkness, and broadcast the announcement for purposes of his own."

"But——"

"You will notice particularly," Mr. Thistlethwaite continued in a voice that, for all its ludicrous, wheezing solemnity, imparted an unaccountable chill to Paul's blood, "the significance of *Wonderland.* Moreover, the word *mad* may offer food for conjecture. We have not seen the end of this matter."

And indeed he was right. As they passed the entrance hall of the great white building, they saw a considerable crowd gathered round the notice-board. It was an angry crowd. They pressed forward and saw, written in capitals on a sheet of paper pinned to the board:

HOW DID YOU LIKE THE DUCKINGS?
WATCH OUT FOR MY NEXT BIT OF FUN.
THE MAD HATTER.

Paul listened to the comments of the crowd.

"Who's this Mad Hatter? . . ."

"Some people were ducked in the sea this morning. Held under. One lady was nearly drowned . . ."

"The management ought to do something . . ."

"One of the visitors was drowned this morning, they say. Deliberately."

"Who did it?"

"The Mad Hatter . . ."

"Get out! It's just another of these competitions. Like the treasure-hunt. A mystery programme, like . . ."

"Watch out, Gertie! There's the Mad Hatter! Just behind you!"

"Eee!—— Oh, you gave me a scare! Why, it's only Mr. Thistlethwaite."

"At your service, madam . . ."

"Wonder what he'll do next? . . ."

"Someone ought to take steps. It's an outrage that . . ."

"We ought to tell Captain Wise."

"Captain Wise is in hospital, somebody said. He was nearly drowned this morning. Three others are dead. . . ."

"Well, this is a nice sort of holiday, I don't think . . ."

After lunch, a special meeting was called. The concert hall was packed when Captain Wise came on to the platform, looking grave but still the acme of efficiency.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he said. "I'm sorry to have to keep you indoors for a little on such a beautiful afternoon. Unfortunately, we seem to have someone here with a rather nasty sense of humour. This morning two visitors and myself were dragged under water and held there, down at the bathing beach. If it had happened only once, we should have assumed it was just a bit of innocent horseplay on someone's part. But the notice that was pinned on the board this morning, signed 'The Mad Hatter,' compels me to believe that some misguided practical joker is at work, systematically. In the first place, I appeal to him—or her—to realise what discomfort he is causing, and leave off. We provide quite enough amusements at Wonderland, surely, to satisfy any one, and we don't want dirty games as well."

"Hear, hear!" boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I can assure you that my staff and myself, with your co-operation, will soon get rid of this public nuisance if he decides to persevere with his foolish pranks. Now I have just a few requests to make. First, those of you who were at the dance last night heard an announcement made over the loud-speakers, to the effect that you were to watch out for the Mad Hatter. It was dark at the time, except for the spotlight. Any one could have come up to the platform from the body of the hall, or entered the hall by those two side doors at either end of the platform, and spoken through the microphone: it was placed, just then, on the extreme right-hand side of the platform. I have already consulted with the band, but none of them could see anything: like yourselves, they assumed it was a surprise announcement made by the management, and paid it no particular attention. If any of you noticed anything suspicious at the time, or any one behaving in a suspicious manner after the lights went up, will he please come to my office and tell me about it.

"Secondly, about the notice that was pinned up this morning. It was certainly not on the board at twelve o'clock, when my secretary put up several notices of my own. If any one saw an unauthorised person putting up a notice between twelve and one o'clock, will he let me know? Thirdly, I'd be grateful if the members of the voluntary sports committee would come to my office as soon as we've finished here. And lastly, may I ask you all to keep this to yourselves. Quite frankly, a thing like this, if it is allowed to leak out—and you know how rumours grow—would be bad for Wonderland. My private belief is that the practical joker—or jokers—will have the decency to stop, now that they realise public opinion is against them. But I've my job to keep, and it's up to me to prevent any repetition of these stupid tricks—even at the risk of seeming to make a mountain out of a molehill. Well, that's all, I think. Thank you all very much."

A few minutes later, Paul Perry was sitting in the resident manager's office with the other members of the sports committee—five women and four men. Captain Wise's secretary, Miss Jones, and Teddy Wise were also there. The glass doors leading on to the balcony were open, and sunlight streamed into the office, lighting up the chromium desk, the filing cupboards, the picture of a regimental group that hung above a built-in electric fire, and Captain Wise's faint, humorous smile. Yes, thought Paul, he looks like the headmaster who, for the sake of discipline, has issued a public denunciation of some harmless rag, and is now relaxing in private to the boys-will-be-boys attitude.

Captain Wise made no reference to what had just happened, except for saying that they could not take any action till they had more facts to work on: no doubt a stream of visitors would soon be invading his office, volunteering information about what they had seen, or thought they had seen, or heard that someone else had seen—information which it would be his own task to sift: he did not wish to bother the sports committee with that kind of stuff.

The sea breeze, blowing gently and steadily through the open window, stirred his fine hair, left undisturbed the sleek head of Miss Jones, who sat with pencil and note-book at his side, demure, the perfect secretary, but still ravishing.

"Well now," said Captain Wise, "let's just run over the programme for to-morrow. In the morning——"

He broke off. There were footsteps padding up the stairs outside. The door opened. A pretty girl, in tennis-shoes, short white skirt and brassière, burst in. There were several others behind her.

"Oh, Captain Wise, I'm sorry to—but we found them in the pavilion like this," she panted. "Look."

She put a box of tennis-balls down on the desk, and opened the lid. The members of the committee were all on their feet, trying to look over Captain Wise's shoulder. The box contained half a dozen tennis-balls. They were all thickly coated with treacle.

Chapter IV

They all stared at the contents of the box, dumb-founded. In silence, too, like a procession of devotees laying gifts upon an altar, the other girls who had been grouped inside the door came forward and placed boxes on the manager's desk.

"I suppose they are tennis-balls all right," said one of the committee at last. "Not bombs."

"I don't think you need worry, Mrs. Greenidge. Not even the I.R.A. would think of coating bombs with treacle," said Captain Wise.

"There was a piece of paper inside my box," the first girl said. "Look. Here it is."

Captain Wise gingerly took up the treacle-stained paper and read out, " 'A present for Elsie, Lacie and Tillie. From the Mad Hatter.' Well, I'm damned! Elsie, Lacie and——"

"That's just what I said to my friend," the girl declared. "It don't make sense. My name's Dolores. None of us are called——"

Miss Jones' cool, competent voice cut in: "Elsie, Lacie and Tillie are the names of the three little girls who lived at the bottom of a treacle well, Captain Wise."

"What on earth are you talking about, Miss Jones?" he exclaimed irritably. "Treacle well?"

"It was part of the dormouse's story in *Alice in Wonderland.* At the Mad Hatter's tea-party, you remember," Miss Jones replied in unruffled tones. There was a short silence.

"I see," said Captain Wise. "Where did you get these boxes?"

"They were the ones put out ready in the pavilion for tennis this afternoon," the first girl said.

"Well, I'm sorry you've been so inconvenienced, Miss Page. Teddy, will you go with these ladies to the store and give them some fresh boxes. Then come back here. Oh, and ask the head chef if a tin of treacle is missing."

"Oh, Mr. Wise," Paul heard the girl saying to Teddy as they trooped out, "I'm so glad you're coming with us. Reely. I don't feel safe with a homicidal maniac at large."

Captain Wise raised his eyebrows and shrugged. "That's what I was afraid of," he said. "If we aren't careful, this nuisance of a practical joker will get magnified into a Jack the Ripper."

"Is there anything we can do to help?" asked one of the committee, a lantern-jawed young man who looked like—and was—the type that is destined by fate to become secretary, live-wire and factotum of any number of clubs and committees.

Captain Wise rubbed his chin backwards and forwards over his upstretched fingers. An unusual moment of indecision, perplexity almost, seemed to be upon him.

"It's very good of you, Mr. Easton," he said at last. "But I think I really cannot ask any of you ladies and gentlemen to come in on this. It would not be fair. You're here for a holiday, and it's the management's business to see that your holiday isn't spoilt."

"But, honestly, it wouldn't spoil it—speaking for myself, that is—and I'm sure I express the opinion of my fellow committee members too," insisted the young man, warming to his work. "I mean, it'd be quite a novelty for us all, a new competition, find the Mad Hatter. See what I mean? Why, you could offer a prize—you know, a reward of so-and-so will be offered to the person giving information which leads to the arrest of the Mad Hatter. Get every one interested. It'd go, you know. You've got something there, Captain Wise."

The manager eyed him speculatively, then looked round at the rest of them. The committee, as is the way of committees, all began talking at once and more or less relevantly.

"It's an idea."

"What I say is, we have no mandate from the members of this camp to take such action. We're a sports committee."

"Well, hunting out this chap would be a sport. A blood-sport, you might say."

"I don't approve of blood-sports. The league for——"

"My boss hunts twice a week. He's a nice, kind gentleman. You'd say he wouldn't hurt a fly. A publisher, he is. He said to me one day——"

"My Flo says she goes in fear and trembling of the Mad Hatter. Still, she's learnt ju-jitsu. I reckon she'd give this joker something to take home. Snap your arm like a match, she can."

"Our Billy swapped his conjuring set at school for a box of practical jokes. Daft tricks, they were. I tanned his behind for him. What I say——"

"Has any of you," cut in a Miss Gardiner, a schoolmistress of heavy limbs and formidable eye, "studied the psychology of the practical joker?"

"I don't hold with these psychologists. They turn you inside out, and what have you to show for it?"

"Your tubes, I suppose."

"The motivation of the practical joker," persisted Miss Gardiner in tones like a mechanised brigade mopping up a disorganised enemy, "is generally inferiority feeling. Unable to take his place on equal terms within the community, his libido or power-urge drives him to expedients which will bring the community down to his own level. Ridiculed himself, he seeks to cast ridicule upon the community as a whole."

"Sort of tit-for-tat, you mean?"

"That would be an over-simplification of the psychosis," replied Miss Gardiner severely. "He is often, too, a person with a strong but suppressed sense of display. Söderman cites the case of one such individual, a member of a voluntary fire-brigade, who on several occasions perpetrated arson solely in order that he might be able to wear his uniform in public. Adler suggests——"

"What uniform does this Mad Hatter wear, anyway? A busby?"

"A top-hat of course, silly."

Here the manager interposed tactfully. "I think we must close this interesting discussion, and get down to the proper business. I can assure you that your suggestions will be borne in mind, and I'll call upon you later if the need arises. For all we know, the practical joker may decide to call it a day. Now then . . ."

The committee began to discuss the details of Monday's programme. The main event was to be a treasure hunt in the afternoon. The course and clues for this had already been prepared by the management. It was the task of the committee members to assist the regular staff in distributing the clues, marshalling the "field", and making other arrangements. The clues were in sealed envelopes which would be given out at dinner to-night, so that earnest treasure-seekers should have the opportunity of studying them leisurely.

When the meeting was over, Paul Perry wandered out towards the tennis-courts. The games being played were not of a very serious nature, for the weekly tournaments did not begin till Tuesday. Paul caught sight of the massive figure of Mr. Thistlethwaite seated in a deck-chair beside a court where Sally and Mr. Morley were playing against another couple. He sat down on the grass near Mr. Thistlethwaite's chair to watch the game.

"You are an exponent yourself, sir?" inquired his companion.

"Up to a point. I don't get much time for it, though, nowadays."

"Ah. You gentlemen of the pen must scorn delights and live laborious days. An arduous calling, indeed, but few can offer such recompenses."

"Your daughter plays well. She seems to be carrying her partner."

"It runs in the family, sir. I myself used to have no little skill at ball-games."

Albert Morley, leaping desperately to intercept a side-line drive, missed the ball and fell sprawling. His opponents laughed: even Sally could not help smiling. Mr. Morley picked himself up, beamed round in the most genial manner, and resumed his stance at the net.

"A good sportsman, Mr. Morley," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "He can always take a joke against himself. It's one of the most sterling facets of our national character, would you not say, sir? Show me a fellow who can join in a laugh at his own expense, and show me one of nature's gentlemen."

Paul did not attempt to dispute this proposition. Instead, he presently inquired:

"How are the people here reacting to this practical joker? Getting a bit rattled?"

"The prevalent attitude is one of calm resolution. The Britisher is not easily to be intimidated. Business as usual, or—should I say?—pleasure as usual, is the watchword of Wonderland just now."

"I wonder what he'll do next. Treacly tennis-balls are rather an anti-climax after attempted drownings."

"Reculer pour mieux sauter, possibly, sir. The speculation is not without interest." Mr. Thistlethwaite turned towards Paul, his deck-chair creaking dangerously. "You made use of the term 'practical joker', sir. Have you considered the implications?"

"What d'you mean?"

"Implications of what, daddy?" It was Sally, who had finished her game and come to sit down beside them with Albert Morley.

"I was speaking of this individual who calls himself the Mad Hatter. In my judgment, the essence of a practical joke is that the perpetrator should not only witness the discomfiture of his victim but also receive due acclaim for his own ingenuity. A joke which you share with no one but yourself cannot give full satisfaction. What conclusions may we draw from that in the present context?"

"You mean," said Paul after a short silence, "that the fellow may have an accomplice—or several—to share the joke with."

"That is a possibility, sir," said Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I think the chap must be a little touched," Mr. Morley volunteered.

"That, again, is a legitimate hypothesis. A madman," Mr.

Thistlethwaite continued in equable tones, "is the one living creature who can share a joke with himself."

"Oh, daddy, do shut up. You're giving me the goo?"

"It might be a case of split personality, I suppose," said Paul. "An individual who wears by turns the motley of the jester and the sober respectability of—well, of such a person as yourself."

"Are you suggesting that daddy is the Mad Hatter? You be careful, Mr. Paul Pry."

"I was merely making a scientific generalisation, Miss Pricklypear."

"There is yet a third construction which might be placed upon these bizarre events," her father enunciated. He placed his finger tips together, and paused dramatically. "It is, that the Mad Hatter is neither a practical joker nor mad. He may be as sane as you or I."

"But, daddy, that's impossible. Either he——"

"In analysing any criminal—that is to say, anti-social—action, we should ask ourselves, not only who stands to gain by it, but also who stands to lose."

"Well, *you* stood to lose. If that beastly person had held me under the water much longer, your beautiful daughter would have been a poor, cold corpse."

Her father, leaning sideways, stroked her head and smiled. A rather fatuous smile, thought Paul, yet in an odd way it seemed to make him real. Mr. Thistlethwaite was so much of a Presence, you could hardly connect him with a private life, with human frailties and relationships.

"No," he was saying, carefully turning out his made-to-measure, discreet sentences. "It is not so much the guests as the Wonderland Ltd. company itself which stands to lose by a continuance of these outrages."

"The implication being that the joker is someone with a grudge against the company?" said Paul.

Mr. Thistlethwaite inclined his head in a gesture of solemn approbation: so might he look when some undergraduate had chosen, under his own suave guidance, a cloth which struck the happy mean between bravura and un-distinction.

Sally said: "But isn't it a very queer way of getting your own back on the company—to make things unpleasant for the visitors?"

"It might be the only way you could do it, don't you think?" said little Mr. Morley unexpectedly.

"Just so, Mr. Morley. And that gives us—does it not?—a pointer towards the miscreant."

"How do you mean?"

"He is a person without influence or standing. Whether his enemy is the company as a whole, or some official of it such as Captain Wise who would lose his post in the event of the outrages driving away any considerable proportion of the visitors, he himself is not in a position to attack the enemy save by these devious and undignified stratagems."

Mr. Thistlethwaite drew a deep breath and stroked the creases of his impeccable flannel trousers.

"One of the servants, perhaps, who has been given the sack?" suggested Paul. "But one would not expect them to be so conversant with the works of Lewis Carroll."

"I suppose even servants can read," said Sally. "Besides, you needn't have read *Alice in Wonderland* to have heard of the Mad Hatter. There are pantomimes."

"But I fancy that Elsie, Lacie and Tillie do not figure in the pantomime," said Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Paul Perry stiffened, regarded him more closely.

"The time-factor," Mr. Thistlethwaite went on, "is also of interest. The great majority of the visitors to Wonderland only stay for one week. Should the outrages persist into a second week, it would eliminate from suspicion all but the staff and the few remaining visitors."

"You've studied the affair pretty closely, I see," said Paul.

"I have given it some attention, sir. As an amateur of criminology, I——"

"What's that you've got in your finger-nail?" Paul asked abruptly, pointing to Mr. Thistlethwaite's middle finger which was still running up and down the crease of a trouser-leg.

"Treacle, I apprehend," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite, unperturbed. "I chanced to be in the vicinity when that young woman found the tennis-balls, and I scraped one of them with my nail in order to determine the substance with which it was coated."

"Oh. I see." Paul felt sadly deflated. "And that's how you knew about the Elsie-Lacie-Tillie stuff?"

"Just so." An expression of mournful reproach came over Mr. Thistlethwaite's bloodhound features. "You did not surely suspect *me,* sir, of any complicity in these occurrences?"

"No. No, of course not. I just——"

"Oh yes, you did, Paul Pry. Don't try and wriggle out. You're looking guilty. You're blushing." Sally was really angry. Her grey eyes flashed a wintry fire. "You go snooping around—yes, I've seen you—putting things down in a little note-book when you think nobody's looking. And you dare to accuse daddy of—why, you're just the sort of person who'd play these mean tricks yourself. And your fingernails aren't so jolly clean either."

"Talking of treacle," said Mr. Thistlethwaite with fluent tact, "I am reminded of an episode which took place in Oxford when I was an apprentice. It centred upon no less a personage than his late Majesty King Edward the Seventh. A very great gentleman, King Teddy. A leader of fashion, too. A very high-spirited young gentleman when in residence. Yes, indeed. It was the result of a wager made between the King and the Duke of Hamilton. The Duke, entering a grocer's establishment, asked for a pound of treacle. On the assistant inquiring whether his noble customer had brought a jar for the treacle, the Duke rejoined, 'Put it in my hat.' The assistant did so. Whereupon the Duke clapped the hat upon the assistant's head, flung down a sovereign on the counter, and decamped. Ah, yes. Full of spirits was his late Majesty."

"A truly royal jest," said Paul sourly.

"I don't see why they didn't have the treacle in a tin—I mean, a jar—all ready. At the shop, I mean," said Albert Morley.

"Do you impugn the veracity of the anecdote, sir."

"Oh no. No. I only just wondered."

If we were casting present company for *Alice in Wonderland,* thought Paul, Albert would certainly be the dormouse. Mr. Thistlethwaite is Father William every time. Myself?—well, I'd rather fancy the Cheshire Cat. And Sally is quite pert and naïve enough for Alice. Paul gazed curiously at his hand, which Sally had taken up just now to demonstrate the alleged uncleanness of his nails: the contemplation aroused in him a feeling so unexpected, so strong that he was compelled to get up and walk straight away without a word from the party beside the tennis-court . . .

In the manager's office, high above the quiet sea, Captain Wise and his brother were talking.

"Well, that's the position, Teddy. Let me just run over what we've found out so far. Take this down, please, Miss Jones. It'll be useful to have it handy in case we turn the business over to the police."

Only by a faintest pursing of the mouth did Miss Jones manifest her astonishment and disapproval. Not so Teddy.

"Oh, look here, old boy. Not the coppers. That really is—why, it'd close us down in a fortnight."

"My dear Teddy, if this joker sticks seriously to his work, he can close us down in a week. I shan't call in the police till the visitors force me to: but they will, if we don't trip up the Mad Hatter pretty soon. Well, now. The announcement over the loud-speakers last night. No one has come forward with information. The chap could have come out of the body of the hall, or from outside the hall through one of the doors beside the platform, or he could be one of the band—in fact, he could have been any one you damn well like, you or me or Miss Jones here."

"Not me, old boy. I was hoofing it with Sally under the spot-light."

"Yes, of course you were. Next, the duckings. Chap probably a man, certainly strong: large hands. Ninety-five people on the bathing beach; we'll be able to eliminate a good few of those, if we ask each of them to say who was near him when the duckings took place, but it'll still leave a packet of suspects. You took down the numbers on the identity discs of every one who left the beach, the names of those who weren't wearing them, and the order they went away in. Not a perfect check, of course. The joker might have complicated things by pinching somebody else's disc for the occasion. Thirdly, the notice on the board. Unless the joker has an accomplice, he must have pinned it up himself. But Miss Jones swears the notice wasn't there at twelve o'clock. Therefore the joker must have put it up after his bathe. Almost certainly, he must have been one of the first people to leave the beach; for the later he left it to pin up the paper, the more people there'd be wandering around by the entrance hall. That narrows us down to the earlier names on your list. We'll go through them again in a minute. Lastly, the treacle business. The chef inspected his stores when you went to see him, but found no tin of treacle missing. Chap must have brought his own, which implies that his plan of action was prepared before he came, which looks as if we were going to hear a good deal more from him. We might search the chalets, but it'd make us unpopular, and anyway he'll have got rid of the tin now if he's any sense. Tennis-balls doped some time between 12.45, when the players put them away in the pavilion, and 2.15, when they were taken out again. That gives us a hell of a period for investigation, though we might have some luck with people noticed arriving late for lunch or leaving early. Damn it, the whole thing's so vague."

Captain Wise exasperatedly smacked the thinning hair on top of his head. "What we want is a detachment of secret police, or something."

"Should I try to obtain an insufflator and finger-print apparatus?" asked Miss Jones, pencil poised over note-book.

"Finger-print app——? Oh, I see. Yes, that microphone might have given us something. Well, perhaps——"

"All these Johnnies wear gloves now, don't they?" said Teddy.

"It's damned ticklish. We can't treat the visitors like a horde of criminals. I——"

There was a knock at the door. Paul Perry entered. "I'm sorry," he said, "I thought you might be alone."

"Alone? Come to confess your crimes, eh?" said Captain Wise with immense jocularity.

"No. But I thought I might be of use to you. About this Mad Hatter business. You see—well, I'd better tell you first what I came to Wonderland for. . . ."

Chapter V

Paul Perry was speaking in his professional voice. He was still new enough to his job to be conscious of this—to wear it both with a certain pride and with a sense of playing a part, as a young officer might feel wearing his uniform for the first time. It was a crisp voice—the voice of the capable, anonymous executive, the smoothly-running cog—far different from his normal tones, which were by turns diffident and aggressive, but by no stretch of imagination could be called assured.

"Usually," he was saying, "we conduct our investigations in an informal way. Gossip picked up in pubs, in the street, and so on: sometimes a prepared series of questions, but asked naturally in the course of conversation. People are apt to draw in their horns if they think they're being got at, though of course Mass Observation is pretty well known to the man in the street by now, and I myself make no secret of being an Observer if asked point-blank. When they sent me down here to do a survey of a typical holiday-camp, I had intended to appear as an ordinary visitor. But these occurrences led me to think I could combine the survey with a bit of detective work."

"I see. How d'you suggest going about it?"

"Well, you could announce that I was here taking a survey on behalf of M.O. That would give me an official status, and interest people too, I think. I could work on the lines I've already planned out, but put in any questions which you consider might be of use for discovering the identity of the practical joker. I'd have a pull over any official detective, because the visitors would assume that all the questions I asked had to do with the survey."

"Yes, there might be something in it. What do you think, Teddy?"

"Sounds O.K. to me. Of course, it's up to Perry, I suppose. I mean, if he can rub along all right with the troops, that's that. Don't want him putting their backs up, though?"

"You any ideas, Miss Jones?" asked Captain Wise quickly, seeing that Paul looked considerably disgruntled by Teddy's comments.

The secretary cocked her sleek head to one side, like a blackbird contemplating a worm. "I think the difficulty would be to fit questions concerning the practical jokes into any Mass Observation questionnaire. I doubt if they'd mix."

"Well, Esmeralda, I'll leave that to you and Mr. Perry." (Esmeralda, thought Paul. Esmeralda Jones. Good Lord! And why ask her opinion just to override it?) "You two go and put your heads together, and see if you can make anything of it."

"Captain Wise is very worried about these developments," said Miss Jones primly as they descended the stairs.

"The nurse echoes the doctor."

She glanced at him sharply, then chuckled. "Yes, I suppose it did sound rather like that."

How nice, thought Paul, to talk to a girl who can pick up your allusions at once, a girl who isn't always on the sex-offensive. He eyed her with more attention. That she was sharp, on the spot, intelligent, one knew: one had also seen her at last night's dance, looking like something out of *Vogue.* The difficulty was to correlate these two persons—to decide which was the real Esmeralda. Paul Perry's earnestness about females was, it may be plainly seen, only equalled by his ignorance of them.

They were outside in the sunshine now, walking towards the swimming-pool whence arose a confused hubbub of bathers taking their dip before tea. Miss Jones seemed to be leading the way.

"Aren't we supposed to be discussing this questionnaire?" he asked.

"The bath's a fine and public place," she said. "One should always discuss secrets in the middle of a crowd. It's the safest way."

"You seem to have studied the technique of conspiracy, Miss Jones."

"Esmeralda will do. It's not the name I should have chosen myself, but Miss Jones puts me straight behind the ribbon counter."

"I suppose you keep Miss Jones for the secretary, and Esmeralda for the——"

"The what?"

"Well," said Paul, feeling suddenly very young and inadequate, "for your private self. You're not a secretary all the time, I mean."

"I'm a secretary just now, my lad. Let's sit down here." She indicated a rustic seat on the grass terrace above the bath.

"Why *is* your employer so worried?" he asked. "After all, a practical joker can't do more than cause a bit of discomfort all round. It's not as if you had a homicidal maniac hanging about."

Miss Jones took off her horn-rimmed glasses, and put them in a case into the side pocket of her neat, polka-dotted silk dress.

"It's not so simple, Paul. This is only the biggest of three Wonderland camps, all run by the same company. As you can see, a great deal of money has been put into them, and if one of the camps came under a cloud, the whole enterprise might easily go under. You've no idea how dangerous the wrong kind of publicity is—even a little of it—for a show like this. And I wouldn't put it past some of our rivals to exploit it, either."

"Big Business does rather stink, doesn't it?"

"Don't be priggish, Paul," she said sharply. "Ninety per cent of humanity would behave the same way to get rich, if they had the courage and the talent to pull it off."

"I can't see that makes it any better."

"Well, we're not here for a symposium on the ethics of business. We——"

"I say, Esmeralda," Paul interrupted excitedly, "d'you think it might be some rival company behind all this? They could send one or two hired agitators, so to speak, as ordinary visitors, to organise trouble in Wonderland. And then——"

Miss Jones laughed—a husky, mischievous laugh which made Paul blush—he did not know whether it was with pleasure or embarrassment.

"Now you *are* being fanciful. No, I don't think Big Business is quite as bad as all that."

"In America, they send agents-provocateurs into the Unions."

"We really must get down to business." She moved a little closer to Paul. He saw Sally Thistlethwaite glancing towards them from the springboard, and obscurely rejoiced. It was nice to put your heads together, as Captain Wise had expressed it, when it was the dark, soigné head of Esmeralda. He waved negligently at Sally, and turned again to his companion.

"You know," he complained, stabbing a finger at the crowd that shrieked, splashed, swam, sauntered or sun-bathed below them, quite regardless—it seemed—of Mad Hatters and their malevolent pranks, "I still don't think this is a good place to concentrate."

"The trained mind," Miss Jones replied austerely, "can concentrate anywhere. Now, tell me first what lines you had intended to work on." . . .

By tea-time, a tentative scheme had been drawn up. If Captain Wise approved of it, he would make an announcement at dinner giving Paul an official status, and Paul could begin his survey next morning. He suggested that, as this was likely to keep him pretty busy, he should resign his place on the sports committee. Miss Jones agreed, and asked him to nominate a substitute. He proposed Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"You'd better ask him if he's willing."

"I'll go along now. I want to get the scheme down on paper at once."

"Shall I have some tea sent to your chalet, then?"

"Thanks very much."

Paul ran Mr. Thistlethwaite to earth on the little verandah of his chalet, where he sat with his wife and daughter awaiting, no doubt, the clamorous harbinger of victuals. He asked him if he would be willing to take his place on the committee: with as much gravity and gratification as if he were being sounded about his willingness to accept a knighthood, Mr. Thistlethwaite acceded to the request.

"——The principle of local government," he perorated, "of which this committee is a minor but none the less significant variation, may be held as integral to a system based upon democratic institutions."

No one sought to challenge the statement. Presently Sally remarked:

"So they've sacked you, have they?"

"No."

"You seem awfully thick with that girl."

"What girl?"

"That secretary creature."

"Oh, her. Yes. She's an intelligent girl. And very good-looking, don't you think?"

"If you like that type."

"I do."

"I say, I believe you've fallen for her," Sally exclaimed with vast animation. "Paul Pry has fallen for a skirt! Wonders never cease!"

"Now, Sally, you mustn't tease. Don't mind her, Mr. Pry," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite comfortably.

"Perry is the name."

Mr. Thistlethwaite delivered a short homily on the emancipation of women. The Modern Girl, he claimed, while taking her place beside the male sex in the great march of progress, yielded nothing to her grandmother in point of femininity. He approved this emancipation as consistent with democratic development. Sally herself, he said, was going through a secretarial course. He understood that the post of secretary to an author was very much sought after, and hinted that Mr. Perry might consider his daughter in that capacity.

"Oh, Paul doesn't want a secretary. What he wants is a harem of highbrows in horn-rimmed goggles," announced Sally, rudely and alliteratively. Her father's protests were cut short by the sound of the gong, and Paul was left alone to draw up his plans.

Half an hour later he sat back and reviewed what he had written.

(i) Why did you choose Wonderland for a visit? *(a)* Saw an advertisement. *(b)* Heard of it from friends. *(c)* Other reasons.

(ii) Why did you prefer a holiday camp to ordinary lodgings at a holiday resort? *(a)* Greater facilities for gregariousness. *(b)* Luxury and cheapness. *(c)* Snob-appeal. *(d)* Novelty. *(e)* Other reasons.

(iii) *(a)* Is the luxury of this place likely to dissatisfy you with your normal home and work environment? *(b)* Does it create envy of those who can afford such food, recreation, etc., all the year round? *(c)* Or do you accept such differences of income as in the nature of things?

(iv) Which do you find the chief attraction of the camp? *(a)* The natural surroundings. *(b)* The luxury. *(c)* The company of other people. *(d)* The entertainments and recreations.

(v) *(a)* Do you like your pleasures to be organised for you to the extent they are in Wonderland? *(b)* At other times do you prefer to be a spectator or a player of games? *(c)* Do you ever, while at the camp, feel a desire for solitude?

(vi) What is your opinion about the Mad Hatter? Is he *(a)* a practical joker? *(b)* mad? *(c)* more than one person? *(d)* a stunt on the part of the management? *(e)* a person with a grievance against the Wonderland Co.? *(f)* Any other theories.

(vii) Does the Mad Hatter's presence *(a)* make things more exciting? *(b)* incline you to leave Wonderland and never return? *(c)* leave you indifferent?

(viii) Do you think the management ought *(a)* to invite the co-operation of the visitors in discovering the Mad Hatter? *(b)* call in the police? *(c)* look after the affair themselves?

(ix) Give your name, age, sex, occupation, address, income, length of stay.

After reading it through, Paul ate the two lumps of sugar in his saucer, crossed out "gregariousness" in question (ii) and substituted "getting together with people," crossed out—reluctantly—"snob-appeal" and wrote in "More variety of entertainment," deleted "income" from question (ix).

He and Miss Jones had finally agreed that it was impossible to insert any questions which might give them information about the Mad Hatter, without making a direct reference to him. They had also decided that this part of the survey, as far as Paul was concerned, should take the form of a questionnaire rather than a series of interviews: he could be certain of getting a larger mass of material thus, a wider basis for further investigation, while it would give the management a fairly coherent picture of the way in which their visitors were reacting to the Mad Hatter. The idea was that, if Captain Wise passed the questionnaire, Miss Jones should duplicate five hundred copies of it, and these should be distributed at dinner to-night.

Taking the note-book, Paul strolled out of his chalet and made for the manager's office. He was not a little pleased with his own share of the questionnaire and the way he had managed to legalise his investigation. He also gave credit to Miss Jones for so skilfully bringing the Mad Hatter business into the open, for neutralising his fantastic activities through the medium of impersonal statistics and thus helping to preserve the visitors' confidence and good humour: Captain Wise was not the only psychologist on the Wonderland staff.

Captain Wise glanced through the questionnaire with the kind of eye that adds up three columns of figures simultaneously. Almost at once his pencil came down on question (vi).

"Whose idea was this—suggesting that the Mad Hatter might be a stunt of the management's? Surely we don't want to put a notion like that into their heads?"

"I suggested it," said Miss Jones crisply. "I heard one or two of the visitors advancing it as a theory, and the best way to show up the absurdity of it is to put it down in black and white."

"Mm. Well, let it stand. I think we should insert a question asking them whether they've seen or heard anything suspicious that might be connected with the practical jokes. People might be more willing to write that kind of thing down than come to me in person about it."

"I thought of that. But wouldn't it be fatal to give them the impression that they're set to spy on one another?"

"Nonsense, Miss Jones. There's no spying about it. Anyway, I've already asked for such information, when I made my announcement at lunch. Put it in."

Odd, reflected Paul, the way he defers one minute and asserts himself the next. He must be fundamentally a weak character. The weak character turned to Paul:

"Very interesting, your part of it. Results might be informative for myself, too. Mind if I looked at them when they come in?"

"Well, I don't know whether——"

"Call it a bit of research on the company's behalf. Give you free drinks during your stay here," suggested Captain Wise outrageously.

"Really! It's not a matter of having to be bribed——" Paul began: then, catching a mischievous glance from Esmeralda Jones, seeing her firm, red lips beginning to form the word "prig," he stopped short. "I tell you what," he said. "Let's swap information. I'll show you the answers to my part of the questionnaire if you show me yours."

It was Captain Wise's turn to look dubious. He tapped the pencil against his regular, white teeth. "I suppose there'd be no harm in it," he said at last, "provided you treated it as strictly confidential. What do you think, Miss Jones?"

"I see no objection. It's irregular, I suppose: but the Mad Hatter's a bit irregular too."

"I suppose we can take it that you aren't the Mad Hatter yourself?" he asked, giving Paul one of his quick, jovial grins.

"You've only my word for it," replied Paul, very much aware of the shrewdness behind the manager's good-humoured gaze.

"Very well, then." Captain Wise turned to the questionnaire again. "Now is there anything we should add to this before we put it out?"

"I'd like to make a suggestion," said Miss Jones. "If Mr. Perry's willing, could we have one more question in the second part? Something on these lines: If you were the Mad Hatter, what single practical joke could you imagine playing which would most disorganise the life of the camp?

"The Mad Hatter, whoever he is, may quite likely fill in the questionnaire himself. He's evidently a bit of an exhibitionist, and he might be tempted to answer that question with particulars about a joke he really does intend to play. As a sort of dare. If he did, we should be that much forewarned. In any case, the answers would give us some idea of the sort of things we may have to guard against. My own belief is that the joker's only just getting into his stride, and he'll be working up to something really big."

"You're very pessimistic about him, Miss Jones. Getting rattled?"

"I've a job to hold down, Captain Wise," she replied tartly.

"All right, then. Put it in as question (ix), and make the one about their name, age, etc., number (x). Heaven knows what the directors'll say when they hear about this questionnaire—it's damned unconventional, to say the least. Let's hope the Mad Hatter'll be scared off now he realises we're taking him seriously."

Captain Wise shot his cuff with a gesture that indicated dismissal, revealing a small, expensive-looking gold wrist-watch. "Better start the great presses turning, Miss Jones. Thanks for your help, Perry: I'll trot you out at dinner to-night." . . .

The little procession that, a couple of hours later, visited each of the two dining-halls consisted of Captain Wise, Paul Perry, Esmeralda Jones carrying the questionnaire papers and the sealed envelopes for the treasure-hunt, and four of the Wonderland staff who would be distributing them. Captain Wise made one of his short, adroit speeches, which allowed neither the diners' interest nor their food to grow cold. Paul, concealing a certain bashfulness beneath a severely professional façade, was introduced in his true colours. Explaining the objects of the two parts of the questionnaire, Captain Wise emphasised that there was not the least compulsion on any one to fill it in, but asked them—if they did so—to do it seriously and without consulting other people about their answers.

His speech aroused a noticeable flutter of curiosity and animation in each of the dining-halls. Mr. Thistlethwaite was heard to pronounce the proceeding an eminently democratic one: several girls squeaked coyly when the name of the Mad Hatter was mentioned; and the schoolmistress, Miss Gardiner, began to give her table a lecture on the workings of Mass Observation. Like the good showman he was, Captain Wise did not linger after he had made his speech, but marched quickly out of the hall, leaving the atmosphere of the curiosity intact and his attendants to distribute the papers.

These were still much in evidence at the Guests' Concert, which took place an hour later. Concerts in Wonderland were of two kinds: every week one was given by the dance band, members of the staff, and a radio or vaudeville star hired for the occasion, and one by the guests themselves. This evening, dotted about the audience in the concert hall, visitors could be seen gripping song-sheets in perspiring hands or furtively blowing down wind instruments. Miss Jones had told Paul that there was seldom any difficulty in filling a programme from the local talent, and much of it was real talent too. It contradicted the statement so commonly made by cultural pundits to-day that the radio has killed musical initiative; this pleased Paul, who believed that not the least important function of Mass Observation was to puncture the generalisations and wishful thinking of cultural pundits.

Paul was gratified, too, by the stir his own appearance created amongst the audience. Heads were raised from the questionnaire papers, ribs were nudged. Paul, in a small way, had become a public figure. Unconsciously assuming a preoccupied, professional manner, he slipped modestly into a seat in a side aisle towards the back. A voice beside him said:

"Good-evening, Mr. Perry."

He turned to find it was an angular, spotty, overpowdered girl, who was gazing at him with a blend of painful shyness and stern resolution.

"I hope you don't mind my speaking to you—— Oh, my name's Arnold, Phyllis Arnold, and this is my friend Janice Mears—you see, we had a discussion at my Left Book Club circle about Mass Observation and we didn't seem able to make up our minds whether it was a good thing or not—I mean, I think the idea's good, it's scientific after all, isn't it?—but some of your pamphlets—well, they make ordinary people, people like me, sound so silly and ignorant—the answers they give to Observers. Of course, I'm not working-class myself, but I'm sure there are lots of people like me who think about political and sociological questions, and your Observers never seem to meet any one except sort of lumpen-proletariat or bourgeois elements who haven't an idea in their heads except having a good time."

Miss Arnold paused, from lack of breath rather than of matter.

"Perhaps you're right. But the conversations in our surveys are all reproduced verbatim as far as possible. It isn't so much that people don't think as that they're inarticulate, perhaps. You're an exception to that, Miss Arnold."

The girl blushed unbecomingly, and seemed to be struck dumb by her own audacity in having addressed him.

"I'm surprised to meet you here," Paul went on, attempting a lighter note. "I should have thought you'd have been at a Left Book Club summer school."

"I did go to one once. But a lot of it was above my head, to tell you the truth. Besides," she added defiantly, "it's rather preaching to the converted, isn't it? There are far more opportunities here."

"I think this is a lovely place," Janice Mears said. She had a pretty, baby face, and a ribbon tied in a bow above her elaborate curls.

"This hall, you mean?"

"Oh, everything. It's all so big and sumptuous, like on the movies. A veritable fairyland, I call it. Why, the palais-de-dance at home isn't in it—and we always used to think that pretty keen. And having people to wait on you, and wonderful meals, and private gardens to walk in—it's like being in a movie yourself."

Paul was taking rapid mental notes: this was right down his street. His eye took in the concert hall, whose height was emphasised by the severity of its lines, the walls sparely decorated in abstract patterns, the Wurlitzer towering above the platform.

"D'you think the Mad Hatter will do anything to-night, Mr. Perry?" asked Janice Mears.

"I shouldn't think there's much scope for him here."

"I think it's daft, acting like that. Anyway, I'm not going to let *him* spoil my holiday."

And so say all of them, thought Paul. The Mad Hatter would have to adopt sterner measures if he wanted to get people like these on the run.

Teddy Wise was on the platform. "Folks," he called, "lend me your ears. We've got a wealth of talent here to-night, and I believe it's going to be the best guest-concert of the season. The first item on the programme is"—he glanced again at the paper in his hand—"is an old English folk-song, 'I Will Give My Love An Apple,' sung by one of our leading amateur basses, Mr. Bernard Scripps. Mr. Scripps, forward please."

A large man, with a bald, conical-shaped head and ragged fringe of moustache, took up his stance on the platform amid applause. The accompanist sat down at the piano, arranged the music, cracked her fingerjoints. Mr. Scripps' moustache waved out gently, like a curtain in a draught, as he exhaled a few deep breaths. Then he nodded to the pianist. He struck an attitude, she the opening chord.

"Glug," said the piano.

Mr. Scripps plunged manfully into the song. His voice was of a terrific resonance, and he let them have it full organ at the start, his moustache agitated like a reed-bed in a hurricane.

"I will give my lerv an erple," he thundered.

"Glug glock cluck glug glug," announced the piano.

Every one was staring at the pianist who was desperately picking at the keys. Rolling his eyes like a terrified horse, Mr. Scripps persisted: but singing to that extraordinary accompaniment was like trying to walk through a morass. After the first stanza, he frankly gave it up. The accompanist, almost in tears, beckoned him, and they peered together into the vitals of the instrument.

The Mad Hatter certainly had not had much scope in this austere hall. Short of poisoning the performers, there was nothing for him to do except tamper with the piano. And this he had done with considerable effect. He had treated it generously to treacle.

Chapter VI

At 7:50 the next morning, Sally Thistlethwaite came awake from a lurid but not altogether unpleasing dream whose *leit motif* had been a duel fought between Teddy Wise and Paul Perry. Like a running fight in a gangster film, this duel had changed locale with bewildering speed. At one moment, the combatants were assaulting each other with beach-balls, egged on by a bevy of glamorous bathing belles: the next, they were far out to sea, flailing about in water that rapidly assumed the colour and consistency of treacle: this naval battle, in turn, faded into a land engagement—Mr. Perry, entrenched behind a Maginot Line of grand pianos and wearing a top hat with a ticket in it, bombarding Mr. Wise with tennis-balls that burst into showers of questionnaire papers. Captain Wise figured intermittently, playing the rather harassed rôle of a referee at an all-in wrestling match. Other figures, too, flitted about on the outskirts of the dream—notably that of Miss Jones, who showed herself consistently in colours of gross treachery and partisanship, like a goddess in some Homeric combat. The duellists themselves evidently had all the arts of Proteus at their finger-tips, for each of them found no difficulty in turning into Mr. Thistlethwaite, a serpent, King Edward VII, a variety of domestic animals, the principal of Sally's secretarial college, and even into Sally herself.

Not being of an introspective turn of mind, the girl did not ask herself why the feeling of warm gratification should persist after she had awoken, but was content to enjoy it. She stretched herself on the Sleepeesi mattress which fulfilled all the promises of the Wonderland brochure, flung off the bedclothes, and dabbled her toes in the stream of sunlight that poured through the open window. Another fine day. The treasure-hunt. Even if it rained, there'd be plenty to do here: she had not tried the rifle range yet, or the ping-pong tables; and there was the cabaret show organised by the women visitors—she'd have a part in that.

If only these silly practical jokes didn't go on. They were so childish. Wasn't it perhaps one of the kids in the camp, or a gang of them? No, of course: the hands which had gripped her ankles and pulled her down so cruelly under the sea had not been a child's hands. Besides, there was what daddy had said last night after the concert. He didn't believe it was a practical joker at all. Teddy Wise had been saying how strange it was that no one had come forward with information—in a camp of five hundred people you'd expect there to be lots of gossip. Then Paul Perry said it was because every one had plenty to do here: gossip was the recreation of those who couldn't afford any other pleasures: or some high-brow remark like that. And daddy said, didn't the same thing apply to the Mad Hatter? No one would indulge in practical joking for its own sake when there was so much ordinary fun to be had here. Paul said this was a false analogy—he *would* dig up some impossible dictionary word. Then daddy got very mysterious and said he had a theory, anyway, and he'd prove there was calculated, cold-blooded malice behind the Mad Hatter's tricks. It had made her own blood run cold for a moment, the way he said it.

Well, whoever he was, he'd been a damp squib so far. Duckings and treacle wouldn't go very far, if he really wanted to wreck people's holiday. Of course, the piano business had annoyed the visitors all right. There'd been mutterings about why the management didn't take more efficient precautions: surely it ought to be easy enough to catch a chap who wandered about with a great tin of treacle, they said. But Teddy had soon got them into a good humour—all except Mr. Scripps, that is; Mr. Scripps had been tearing mad and flung off and said he was going to leave the next morning and wanted his money back. Poor Mr. Scripps—he'd looked so funny, blowing out his moustache and trying to sing while the piano went glug glug glug. People had laughed at him—you could hardly blame them—but singers are so touchy if anything goes wrong.

Yes, Teddy had been marvellous. Turned the whole thing into a joke, got every one laughing—nicely, not the way they'd begun to laugh at Mr. Scripps, called for some weight-lifters to help fetch in another piano out of the dance hall. The concert had gone ahead all right, just as if nothing had happened. Well, perhaps that wasn't quite true. Some of the performers were up the spout—nervous about what might happen next, in the middle of their turn perhaps. There was the girl who tried to play a bit of classical music on a clarinet: well, high-brow music was pretty awful, but it certainly couldn't have been meant to sound like that: she'd said there was something wrong with the reed, after she'd broken down, and every one had been very sympathetic. And then, you couldn't help being a bit put off by the way the Wonderland staff kept coming and going and whispering together. Captain Wise had asked if the visitors would mind having their chalets searched, and they'd taken a vote and every one agreed: they had to agree, of course, after complaining that the management wasn't doing its stuff. But it was difficult for the audience to concentrate on the music when they were expecting someone to come in any moment and say that an empty tin of treacle had been found in somebody's chalet. You couldn't be quite sure it wouldn't turn up in your own, for that matter.

Still, all things considered, the concert didn't go off too badly. And Teddy was certainly marvellous the way he'd handled them.

Teddy's a nice boy, too. Handsome as they come. And you know where you are with him. Quite different from Paul Pry, who talks a different language and always seems to be trying to get at you. Paul has nice hands, though. He'd not be bad-looking if he didn't scowl so much. He's interesting, too, in a way Teddy isn't. Of course, Teddy has to mind his p's and q's, being games organiser here; he mustn't show more interest in one girl than in another; it's like being an officer on a ship. I wonder is Paul interested in me. He seems to go about with that secretary creature a lot. He'll need someone to look after him, if that girl gets on the war-path. She'd only be leading him on, too: Captain Wise is what she's really after, I'd bet a dollar: look at his Lagonda and his clothes and everything—well, if I was a gold-digger like Esmeralda Jones, I'd look that way myself. Still, no reason why I should let her get the claws into Paul. He's so helpless. The bookish type. Books don't teach you how to deal with vamps like the Jones. Funny my dreaming about them. Funny if Paul and Teddy really did have a fight. Poor Paul'd certainly get beaten up. Fancy fighting in a top hat, like he did in my dream! It had a ticket in it. The Mad Hatter's hat. Well, of course, it was nonsense. It was just a dream. Snap out of it, Sally. Forget it.

The girl reached out her arm for an envelope that lay on the floor where she had thrown it last night. It contained the first clues for this afternoon's treasure-hunt. The system on which the treasure-hunt worked was that each competitor received clues directing him to a certain point, where he would find a second clue hidden to indicate his next objective, and so on. In all, there were six main clues hidden on the Wonderland grounds or the adjacent countryside: to prevent it becoming simply a game of follow-my-leader, the initial clue led in a number of different directions, thus dispersing the company at the start. On reaching your first base, but not before, you were allowed to pair off with any other competitor who turned up there: the clues at all these first bases led to a single second base, and from there all the hunters were working on the same trail.

Sally had meant to study her initial clue last night—the year before she had only been baulked of victory by a huge and ferocious bull which appeared in the last field between her and the treasure and turned out later to be a cow—but she had dropped off to sleep before looking at it.

Rolling over on to her stomach, she opened the envelope and drew out a sheet of paper. As she glanced at the clue, her restless body grew rigid.

"A hermit good lives in a wood,
His beard is long and white,
In the old man's beard by the roadside bush
I'm hidden out of sight."

Sally's eye fell upon the open window, its curtains stirring a little in the breeze. A waft of panic went through her. Automatically, like a sleep-walker or as if she had felt a sudden chill, she put on her dressing-gown. She took herself by the scruff of the neck and forced herself to go over to the window.

There was nothing outside. Well, of course, there wasn't. Nothing but the rhododendron bushes and the birches which stood at the back of this row of chalets: the "sylvan surroundings" so justly celebrated in the Wonderland brochure. There was nothing to be afraid of. They hadn't crept closer to her window in the night. Sally turned away, knocked at the partition door, went through into her parents' bedroom.

Mr. Thistlethwaite was sitting up in bed, meticulously filling in the questionnaire paper while his wife drank her early-morning tea. The scene was so ordinary, so familiar that it broke down Sally's resistance. Sobbing a little, she flung herself on to the bed.

"What is it, girlie?" asked Mr. Thistlethwaite, startled. She pushed the clue-paper blindly into his hand.

"He must have been into my room last night. He took the real one away and left this."

"Now, now. Whatever——?" Mr. Thistlethwaite read aloud the sinister rhyme. "I don't understand. 'He took the real one away'?"

"Yes. It's the first clue for the treasure-hunt, don't you see? It ought to be, I mean, but——"

"But what's wrong with this, dear?" said her mother. "It sounds just like an ordinary clue to me."

"It can't be. Don't you see?—it means that the next clue is hidden in the hermit's beard—that horrible old man who lives in the wood up there—the one who shook his fist at me. Well, it's absurd. Captain Wise, or whoever makes up these clues—they'd never hide one in the hermit's beard and expect him to stand about while visitors searched him for it. It's mad."

"It would certainly appear in somewhat questionable taste," said Mr. Thistlethwaite, recovering his equipoise.

"Well then. If this isn't one of the genuine clues, it must have been written just to frighten me, and left in my room. Every one knows I'm scared of that dreadful old hermit, and——"

"One moment." Her father raised a fat and imperious finger. " 'Every one knows'? Whom have you told about him, apart from your mother and myself?"

"Golly! That's quite true. 'S a matter of fact, I was rather ashamed of being frightened. I didn't tell any one except Teddy. Or did I? No, I didn't. Oh yes, Paul Pry overheard me then. He was teasing me about it yesterday morning when we went down to bathe."

An expression of vast sagacity flooded Mr. Thistlethwaite's face. "That is most suggestive. Unless, of course, Mr. Wise or Mr. Perry passed on the information to someone else. Mr. Perry and Mr. Wise. Hrrumph. It seems as if one of them must be the, ah, poison pen behind this missive. In which event——"

"Mr. Wise and Mr. Perry? It's nonsense," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite. "They're both very kind, pleasantly spoken gentlemen. You'll be telling me one of them is the Mad Hatter next. I can't think what you two are making such a fuss about."

"Oh, but mummy, can't you understand——?"

"My love, surely it is abundantly evident that——" exclaimed Sally and her father simultaneously.

"This is not such good tea as we have at home, do you think, James?" Mrs. Thistlethwaite mildly poured herself another cup. "What I've been trying to say—only you two were so excited you wouldn't let me get a word in—is that you're making a fuss about nothing. Show me that poetry. Yes, I thought so. You girls nowadays never seem to learn anything useful at school. You can't cook. You can't sew. It's all French and Science and papier mâché. Now when I was a girl——"

"Mother, will you *please* keep to the point?"

"When I was a young girl—and that was a long time ago, but I still remember some of the things I learnt—they used to teach us botany. Our teacher was a Miss Brown, I recollect. Botany, she always said, was such a lady-like pursuit. I still have some of the pressed flowers I used to collect then. I do believe I won a prize for it once. Oh, where was I?"

"You were talking about your hectic girlhood, mother," said Sally with restraint.

"Of course. Well, this old man's beard is nothing to do with a hermit. Hermit indeed! Poof! It's a plant. Some people call it Traveller's Joy. Its flowers have four thick downy sepals, and in the autumn the styles lengthen into the shape of little white beards. All this poetry you've both got so excited about means is that there's a clue hidden amongst the old-man's-beard on a bush beside the road. What you two need is a good dose of salts—this Mad Hatter has got on your nerves."

"Hum . . . Chk, chk, chk . . . Well, indeed," Mr. Thistlethwaite muttered, avoiding his wife's eye.

"And this *is* the real clue after all?" exclaimed Sally. She bounced over the bed and embraced her mother. "Oh, I'm so relieved! Honestly, it did make me windy. Darling, you stay at the top of your class!"

"That's my stomach you're kicking," complained Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Sally's face fell. "Oh, but I'll still have to go up to that wood to find the clue. Brrrh! I hope the old hermit isn't at home. I do think it was silly of Captain Wise to choose a place like that to hide it. He knows the hermit hates this camp. And he'll be livid with a lot of visitors trampling all round his hide-out. . . . Golly, look at the time! I'm due for the P.T. class."

Five minutes later, a little out of breath but becomingly flushed, she was on the recreation ground where every morning at 8.30 the Games Organiser or one of his assistants conducted them in the milder forms of physical jerks. To-day Teddy Wise was officiating in person.

"Hallo, here's Sally," he said as she approached. "And all glorious without."

"All glorious without what?" Sally gave the regular response to the well-worn gambit, but with less vivacity than usual. Teddy's automatic facetiousness seemed to-day so very much part of a stock-in-trade: a loud-speaker could do the job just as well. Am I going off him? was the way she put it to herself.

She took her place in the front rank of the little platoon, whose uniform was shorts, brassière, and sandals; followed the exercises Teddy sketched out in easy, perfunctory movements; vaguely heard the grunts and protests of the older women at the back, whose elasticity was not a match for their earnestness. Doing a trunk-roll, her eyes on Teddy to keep the rhythm, she thought, he's got a marvellous chest, just like Johnny Weissmuller: and his arms—wish I could tan like that—of course, he's doing it all the summer: must be funny, just playing games all the time, queer sort of life—and women yearning at you from every angle and not being supposed to make a pass at any of them, like a clergyman: wonder how he gets on when he's alone? It came to her with an odd, delayed sensation of surprise that she could not imagine Teddy alone.

They paused for a breather. Teddy yawned and stretched. "Got a bit of sleep coming to me," he said. "Late night."

"Oh, Mr. Wise, was you on guard—against the Mad Hatter, I mean?"

"No fear. Safely leave him to you muscular ladies, what? No, I had to clock in for planting the clues for the treasure-hunt. Moonlight operations. Not so good. I've stationed a few bulls along the course, Sally, just to keep you on the hop. Hey, she's gone off into a trance! Wake up, Sally! What are you staring at?"

He turned slowly to see what she was pointing at. "It's Miss—what's her name?—the schoolmistress one—Gardiner. What on earth is she carrying?"

For Sally, the moment was a far worse one than when she had been dragged under the water. That had been too sudden for fear: this was so slow that every gradation up to the topmost pitch of horror could be exactly felt. It was like the feet of mourners, moving reluctantly and irresistibly to the open grave. And yet, when she looked back on it later, there was nothing really to account for the paralysis of terror that had come over her. Nothing but a large-limbed woman, in jumper and tweed skirt, walking towards them with steps that neither dragged nor hurried—walking out of the leafy morning and curving crescent of the chalets, holding something in her arms.

"What the devil's she carrying?" Teddy repeated weakly. You could see nothing at this distance but a white blur against the strident orange jumper.

Steadily, almost with the deadly, impersonal intent of some wireless-controlled tank, Miss Gardiner advanced towards them. She carried the thing un-self-consciously but somehow unnaturally, as a capable spinster might carry a baby. When she got nearer to them, her pince-nez flashing in the sun, she held it out with the gesture of one making a formal offering. It was a dog—a wire-haired terrier, its body arched into a hideous sickle.

"Mr. Wise," she said in a voice like doom, "why were no precautions taken? This dog has been poisoned."

"Really, I'm terribly sorry, but——"

There was a scream behind Sally. A woman rushed forward and snatched the dog out of Miss Gardiner's arms. "It's Bingo!" she cried. "It's my little dog! You"—she stared distractedly at Miss Gardiner—"you did it! You poisoned Bingo!"

Chapter VII

Pets' Corner had been the brain-wave of a Wonderland director, and part of the company's policy to go one better than any existing holiday camp. When other camps set their face against the introduction of domestic animals, the Wonderland brochure's slogan was: "Don't leave your dumb friends at home! Bring them to Wonderland and instal them in our superbly equipped Pets' Corner! Give them a holiday too—scampers over the fragrant turf, bathes in the sparkling brine, everything to delight a doggie's heart!"

This director, however, had considerably over-estimated the pet-mindedness of the Wonderland clientèle. Most of these were young people who lived in towns and evinced none of the upper-middle-class's morbid cynophilia, while those that did keep pets seemed only too ready to escape from their demands while on holiday. So Pets' Corner, with its bijou, semi-detached kennels and hygienic drinking troughs, remained for the most part untenanted—a monument to a great illusion. Such dumb friends as did turn up might well have considered themselves double-crossed by the company, moreover; for scampering over the fragrant turf and bathes in the sparkling brine were rigorously confined to the early hours of the morning and late in the evening. For the rest of the day, they had to be taken about on leads or stay moping in their palatial concentration camp.

Irked by these restrictions, Bingo—a spirited liberty-lover—had the day before vented his feelings on the first available victim, which happened to be Miss Gardiner's Siamese cat. Bingo wished no part of any cat, and the unnatural aspect of this one was an added offence to him. He himself had been on a lead and the cat curled up on Miss Gardiner's shoulder, when they met in the course of their afternoon walk. Bingo slipped his lead, jumped at Miss Gardiner, dislodged the cat, achieved a mouthful of its fur, and chased it happily up a tree. It was then that Miss Gardiner had informed Bingo's owner that, if the lady could not keep her brute under control, she herself would poison it. Accustomed to dealing with classes of twenty to forty infants, Miss Gardiner was presumably no believer in half-measures. Still, spare the rod spoil the child was not quite the same thing as spare the poison spoil the dog.

Most of the onlookers, therefore, while shocked by the scene and sympathetic towards Bingo's owner, had no doubt that her accusation was purely hysterical. Looking back on it later Paul Perry, who witnessed the event and went with the group of people that by tacit consent followed the bereaved woman towards Pets' Corner, was inclined to think that this was the first moment when the Mad Hatter really made his mark. It was noticeable that, for a little, no one mentioned his name at all; and, when they did, it was in uneasy whispers and with a certain closing of the ranks, as though the shadowy creature—a phial of strychnine still in his hand—might be awaiting them anywhere along the chalet avenue.

They encountered, however, no one more alarming than Mr. Thistlethwaite. He quickly took charge of the proceedings, in default of Teddy Wise who was still heavily engaged by Miss Gardiner: they could still hear her voice, tapping out like a ruler on a desk, as she demonstrated to him the gross inadequacy of the management.

Mr. Thistlethwaite addressed a few well-chosen words of condolence to the dog's owner, sent a girl scurrying off to fetch the resident doctor, established the fact that a woman sleeping in one of the outlying chalets had been awoken by a dog barking at twenty minutes past three, deduced that this might have been the hour of the crime, and led the party safely round the wood beyond which Pets' Corner lay and whose tangled undergrowth was supposed to blanket any disturbance the animals might make at night.

When they reached the scene of the crime, they found that the other occupants of Pets' Corner—three dogs and Miss Gardiner's cat—were unhurt.

"I wonder why he didn't poison the lot while he was about it," said Sally to Paul. "I suppose he threw a bit of poisoned meat over the wire into Bingo's kennel. What a beastly, dirty trick!"

"Yes, it's queer, that. It looks as if he was striking at one person at a time now. And he's learning the weak spots, too."

"Meaning what?"

"Well, that chap Scripps. The Mad Hatter realised he was of the *genus irritabile* of singers, so he doped the piano for him, knowing it would make him fly off the handle."

"But how did he know Scripps was going to be the first performer?"

"All the performers were told the order of the programme beforehand, I imagine. The Mad Hatter could easily have found out from one of them. And then this dog. He might have poisoned any or all of the animals, but he chose the one whose death would cause really bad feeling. There'd been a row about Bingo and Miss Gardiner's cat—but of course you know that. Yes, the chap's getting his hand in all right."

Sally shivered and turned away. They were quite near the rather dilapidated stone wall which marked the boundary of the camp, she noticed.

"I say, Paul," she exclaimed suddenly, clutching his sleeve. "I've got an idea."

"Yes?"

"Supposing—no, it sounds too absurd. But look here, will you partner me in the treasure-hunt this afternoon? We're supposed all to start separately, but nobody'll notice if we slip off together."

"Treasure-hunts aren't much in my line. Anyway, I shall be going over the questionnaire papers after lunch."

She shook his sleeve vehemently. "Oh, don't be so stuffy, my pet. You know you'd rather be with me than glooming over those dreary papers."

"You flatter yourself. And they're not."

"Be human for once. Say you'll come. Please."

"But what's it all about?"

"Promise not to tell any one."

"Yes."

"Well, you and I are going to hunt for the Mad Hatter."

There was a short pause. The wind gave the leaves overhead a little shake, and passed on.

"All right, then. I'll come. But I bet it's a wild-goose chase."

At this point the camp doctor arrived. Dr. Holford was a young man, new in practice, who was only too glad to receive a month's free holiday at Wonderland in return for services which were seldom called upon. Mr. Thistlethwaite came forward from the group of people that was standing, rather aimlessly now, beside the late Bingo's kennel.

"Doctor Holford?" he inquired, with a majordomo's gesture. "You have been apprised, doubtless, of the latest outrage. In order to lay the miscreant by the heels, we must satisfy ourselves as to the exact time when the poison was administered. We already have received some indications on this point, which may be clinched by your own opinion. This way, sir, if you please. There he is. Poor Bingo. The innocent victim of a ruffian, who thereby struck a cowardly blow at the heart of this community." An easy tear came to Mr. Thistlethwaite's eye.

Concealing his bewilderment beneath a professional briskness, Dr. Holford knelt down beside the animal. Presently he said:

"Strychnine. I'm afraid I can't tell you at all exactly what time it happened. I'm no vet. Three to six hours ago, maybe."

"Possibly, sir, a post-mortem would——"

"No. I won't have that," exclaimed Bingo's owner. "I don't want my poor doggie cut up. I'm going to bury him."

"Quite. It would be little use in any case," said the doctor with soothing tact. "There are five hundred people in this camp, and knowing what time the dog was killed wouldn't get us much nearer to finding out which one of them did it."

A girl said: "Mr. Wise was out last night, hiding the clues for the treasure-hunt."

Mr. Thistlethwaite inflated himself. "Young woman, random insinuations are both unreasonable and otiose. Let us hear no more of them."

"All right, all right," replied the girl, much aggrieved. "There's no need to jump down my throat. I was only trying to be helpful. What I meant was, Mr. Wise might have seen someone prowling about near here."

"In that event, he will communicate the information to the right quarters."

"And I don't see what business of yours it is, either, bally-ragging people and chucking your weight about. And what a weight!" the girl added, sensing an advantage.

To Paul's intense embarrassment, Sally commented in a whining travesty of the girl's tone, "Boo-hoo! I want to go home to mother."

The imminent scene was averted by the arrival of Teddy Wise in person. He declared that he'd seen no one suspicious during his night operations.

"We may take it, sir, you were not in the immediate vicinity of Pets' Corner?"

"Oh well, that'd be telling secrets. If I said yes, you'd know that one of the clues was hidden near here. Not so good. I can tell you this, though. Members of the staff were keeping an eye on the chalets and the main buildings all night—and they'll go on doing it for the duration. So you ladies can shut the glad eye o' nights quite regardless. Unfortunately, we never imagined the joker would take a stab at Pets' Corner, so there was no one watching here. Bad show. Well, chaps, the breakfast's getting cold. Let's trek along. Oh, and by the way, my brother says the management will give you another dog, Miss Lightfoot. Not the same thing, I know. Old friend, and all that. Can't really replace 'em. Still, we'll get you a fine little chap—any one you like to choose. Pop you in to Applestock this morning, if you like, and have a look round for one."

This announcement of Captain Wise's bounty was received with a strangled sob by Miss Lightfoot and gratified murmurs from the rest. The management did not normally hold itself responsible for the health of animals brought to the camp.

At breakfast, the conversation was largely occupied by the Mad Hatter. He was still, to most, more of a curiosity than a menace: but his latest exploit, together with the second part of the questionnaire, had evidently stimulated interest.

"I suppose," said Mr. Morley to Paul, bobbing his head and wiping his mouth with a paper napkin in a way that contrived to be both ungainly and self-deprecatory, "I suppose this business is going to interfere with your own investigations, Mr. Perry."

"Well, yes. I'm afraid it may make them quite impossible. You see, the object was to present a survey of normal life in a holiday camp. And things seem to be getting less normal every minute."

"I've been filling in my questionnaire paper, Mr. Perry. Very interesting it was to me. Though I couldn't always follow what you were driving at. That bit about whether you prefer to be a spectator or a player of games, for instance."

"Well, the object of that was to find out if visitors behave in a different way here from their ordinary life. Almost every one at Wonderland goes in for some of the recreations. I wanted to see if they played the games here simply because—well, because they're out to get their money's worth, or because they always play games when they get the opportunity."

"Oh. Ye-es, I see," said Albert Morley, who palpably did not. "But I still don't see what's behind it. What good does it do to find out that sort of thing? If it was a statistical survey on behalf of a business firm, it'd be different: that's part of the science of salesmanship: I've studied it a bit, mind you—I like to keep up with the times, and you never know when it'll come in useful. Suppose I got the—decided to join some other firm, say. What I mean to say is, I read a book about Mass Observation once. It had all about how people behave in pubs, how they light their pipes, what they say when they invite another chap to have a drink—well, honestly, it had me beat. I thought it a lot of fuss about nothing."

"You don't believe in anthropology—in acquiring knowledge about the behaviour of human beings?"

"It's all right for scientists, I suppose," said Albert dubiously. "But you won't get the general public interested in it."

"The general public seems quite interested at the moment. Look at all those people studying their questionnaires."

"You haven't got my meaning right, sir." Mr. Morley looked baffled, but pertinacious. "What I'm trying to say is, the public doesn't want science to tell them what they know already, like——"

"So much the worse for the public. Anyway, they *don't* know it. All sorts of new institutions, new manners, new modes of behaviour are springing up to-day, mixing with survivals of past customs. Human life is always shifting, like sandbanks, and someone ought to keep it charted."

Mr. Morley beamed all over his rosy little face. "Ah, now you're talking. That's more like it. That's the romance of science."

"Science isn't romantic."

"Oh, but it is, Mr. Perry. Believe me. Think of the stars. I've read them—Jeans and Eddington—I read quite a bit in my spare time. All those worlds burning away, billions of miles up there, all part of the cosmic dance. And then some of these youngsters say they don't believe in God. I've often wished I could afford a telescope—a proper astronomer's one——"

"We seem to have got rather far from the subject," said Paul coldly. He had all the novice scientist's contempt for the layman. He did not really intend to snub Mr. Morley, perhaps, but the little man's wanderings had driven him almost to distraction. It was difficult, also, to keep one ear open for Albert Morley and at the same time listen to the talk going on all round. Paul had a separate note-book, in which he hoped to collect the conversational subjects of the camp. It was already divided into red-ink headings—the life of the camp, gossip about visitors, sex, the films, politics, occupational talk, sport, clothes, home life, and so on. The relative frequencies of these subjects, worked out to two decimal places, would help to round off the picture of holiday-camp life.

But the Mad Hatter, whether he was lunatic, practical joker or deliberate sabotageur, was certainly going to falsify such statistics. The tables were all agog with him, and Paul noticed how quickly heads were raised and a brief, expectant silence fell whenever a member of the staff entered the dining-hall. What is Captain Wise going to do about it? was the main theme, worked out with many variations of inquisitiveness, flippancy, indignation, pessimism or wild fancy. One thing the visitors were evidently going to do about it: they had no intention of starting off upon the treasure-hunt severally: single individuals would be far too vulnerable a mark for the Hatter.

"I don't care what the rules are. I'm not starting off alone, Leonard, so you can take it or leave it. If you don't *want* to partner me, of course," said Miss Janice Mears archly, "I expect I can find another gentleman."

"Oh, I'll come. Anything for a quiet life. But suppose *I*'m the Mad Hatter?"

"Get on, Leonard! Suppose I'm Greta Garbo!"

That's another interesting thing, reflected Paul. They've at last been forced to take the existence of the Hatter seriously, but they are still unable to envisage him as possibly one of their own acquaintance. A simple defence-mechanism at work, of course: if that were broken down, we should have all the conditions for panic. . . .

There were no further manifestations that morning. After lunch the treasure-hunters, about a hundred strong, assembled outside the sports pavilion. Sally, sensibly dressed in blue slacks and a blue jersey, got away to a good start with Paul. She led the way round the copse, past Pets' Corner, over the dilapidated stone wall and uphill.

"Where are we going?"

"To the hermit's wood," she said, showing Paul her clue.

"Isn't it time you explained what——?"

"Wait. I want to be sure we're well away from the others."

How women revel in petty secrecy, thought Paul indulgently: it's just a way of exercising power; and it always defeats itself sooner or later: the Pandora complex.

The turf on this rising slope was springy under their feet. Thyme and harebells grew here, and the sky above them gave back the misty, delicate blue of the harebells. Paul, unusually charmed by the afternoon's beauty, paused to look back over the sea that fitted snugly, like jig-saw pieces, into the indentations of cliff below.

"Come on," said Sally, tugging at his sleeve. "We've got to hurry. You can admire Nature some other time."

"I don't admire Nature. I think she's capricious, wasteful and a deceiver. Just like a woman."

"But she's beautiful and you can't get away from her. All right—don't look so scared. I'm not going to lead you astray, you solemn old misog—— What is it?"

"Misogynist. You do love bossing people about, don't you, Sally?"

"Well, you oughtn't to be yearning over Nature. You ought to be admiring me."

"Oh, I do. I think you're very pretty."

"Jeepers-creepers! Put some conviction into your voice, my pet. 'I think you're very pretty' "—she rendered an exact imitation of his stilted, reluctant tones. "I can see I shall have to educate you."

"Heaven preserve me!"

"Well, you needn't be nasty."

Sally looked crestfallen, her lip pouting. She went from mood to mood like a butterfly. The next moment she was dragging Paul down under shelter of a stone wall, as though she had seen a sniper in the wood that broadened out into the distance, its apex resting on the road opposite them.

"Here we are alone," she sang under her breath, "out of cigarettes

. . . Yes, that must be the bush in my clue. See those white flowers. They're Old-man's-beard."

"Well, aren't we going to look for the second clue? It'll be hidden in that bush somewhere."

"No, my pet, we're not. Let's sit down and be comfortable, and your auntie will tell you a nice story." Their backs were against the stone wall; her shoulder pressed confidingly on his. "We came a short cut. The other people who've got this clue will be pounding along the road. We'll let them go past."

"You're certainly a mistress of suspense."

"Do you know who lives in that wood?"

"Some hermit or other, isn't it?"

"Yes. And do you know who he is?"

"John the Baptist?"

"He's the Mad Hatter," Sally whispered.

Paul stared at her incredulously for a moment. Then he laughed, and said:

"Why, of course, how stupid of me! I've often seen him skulking about the camp in his long, grey beard. A quite unmistakable figure."

"Are we sarcastic or are we sarcastic? Just listen a minute. Teddy told me all about the hermit. Before they built the camp here, he used to live alone in a sort of shack near the cliffs. He was a simple-lifer—a bit daft, but quite harmless. He'd been here for years, and the chap who owned the land let him have his little patch rent-free. And then—golly, what's that?"

Paul swivelled round and popped his head over the top of the wall. "It's all right," he said presently: "only some of the treasure-hunters. You've chosen rather a public place for your narrative, haven't you?"

"I wanted to be here so that we could see if the hermit's at home. He'll come bouncing out at these people if he is. Well, the chap who owned the land lost his money and had to sell. That was about three years ago. Nobody'd buy it, though, till the Wonderland people came along and decided it'd be a good place for a holiday camp. There was a terrific row on the local council about it, apparently."

"I bet there was. Beauty-snobs versus main-chancers."

Sally glanced at him, puzzled for a moment. It occurred to Paul that Esmeralda Jones would have taken the point at once—and that Sally looked rather plain when she was out of her depth.

"Some of the council said they ought not to allow the camp, because it would spoil the look of the countryside—the coast just here is supposed to be a beauty spot—and would bring a lot of riff-raff into the district.

People like you and me, my pet. They were the retired colonels and landowners who said that. And others said the camp wouldn't spoil the countryside, because look at the lovely plans Wonderland had sent in, and it would give employment and help the shopkeepers and the rates and so on."

"And they were the local builders and shopkeepers who said that, no doubt," Paul commented.

"Well, anyway, the council was torn between two opinions——"

"My dear, it sounds like something out of the Acts of the Apostles!"

"Oh, do shut up! Some bird from London was called in to give them advice and a sort of commission was held. You know—people giving evidence. The hermit was one of them. He fairly went up in smoke about the camp, apparently: said it would make Sodom and Gomorrah look like a spinsters' knitting-bee, and only over his dead body, and all that. Well, finally the pro-camp side won. Wonderland bought the park and a chunk of the cliffs and foreshore, and the poor old hermit was evicted. It took quite a posse to shift him, too. But Hermie was an obstinate old boy —just like you, my pet. He settled down again on the nearest spot he could to the camp——"

"Protesting, doubtless, his need for lebensraum."

"—Which was this wood, and proceeded to make a nuisance of himself."

"Oh, he did, did he?" said Paul thoughtfully.

"He certainly did. The first summer camp started, he used to sprinkle nails all over the road here, Teddy says, so that the camp bus got punctures. Things like that. They had to get an injunction or whatever it is against him in the end. That put a spoke in him, and he's been pretty quiet ever since, except for popping out of the wood and gnashing his teeth at the Wonderland visitors every now and then. The management keep pretty dark about him—when I was here last year I never even heard of his existence—because they can't do anything more: the chap who previously owned all the land, still owns the wood, and he said it was O.K. by him for the hermit to live there. As I say, he kept quiet, *till this week."*

Sally paused dramatically. The voices of the last pair of treasure-seekers gabbled away into silence. There was nothing now to be heard but faint, intermittent stirrings within the wood across the road.

"But, my dear child, it's absurd. Granted this hermit has a better motive than any we've yet heard of for making trouble in the camp. But remember the duckings. Somebody'd be bound to have noticed if a long grey beaver was swimming around."

"I've thought of that——"

"And then there's the green disks that every one at the camp has to wear. They're meant just for that purpose—to ensure that no unauthorised person gate-crashes on the Wonderland amenities. You have to give them back at the end of your visit. How on earth could he get hold of one?"

"Oh, that'd be easy. People lose them sometimes. He probably picked up one that'd been dropped near here. I dare say it gave him the whole idea of Mad-Hattering the camp."

"And how do you explain away his beard?"

"It's false."

"But——"

"Do *listen!* He cut off his beard, went clean-shaven to a shop and bought a long false beard, reappeared as the same old hermit. Whenever he wants to enter the camp, he just takes off his beard, has a general clean-up, puts on more respectable clothes."

"But he must be fairly old to have had a grey beard at all. A man as old as that would show up in the camp."

"Why should he? There's quite a sprinkling of oldish people here. And amongst five hundred of us he'd not be particularly noticed. Every one's very free and easy in the camp, and they're not here long enough for either themselves or the staff to begin picking out individuals much. If you've got a green disk on, you're O.K."

"Yes, there's something in that. But look here, he's an *old* man. An old man wouldn't be strong enough to hold Captain Wise under water."

"But he's a strong old man. I told you, he's a simple-lifer. Eats acorns and things. And Teddy says he walks into Applestock—that's eight miles away—once or twice a week, and brings back food in a sack."

"Acorns, I suppose? And, if he frequents Applestock, he's not a hermit."

"—So he must be hefty enough."

The hysterical laughter of a jay broke from the wood. A ladybird was climbing diligently along Sally's blue-trousered leg. Paul watched it, his heart stirring uneasily; he tried to shut out from his mind the feel of Sally's hand as it brushed against his, to postpone somehow—if only by absorbing his eye in the ladybird's progress—the full consciousness of what her words implied.

"Well," he said at last, "there may be something in it. It'd be worth suggesting to Captain Wise."

"Yes. We're going to find out a bit more first, though, if we can."

"How d'you mean?"

"We're going to find the hermit's lair—or whatever it is a hermit lives in—and see if he's left any clues."

"No, damn it, we can't do that. Supposing he's there?"

"If he's there, we'll just say we've lost our way, and sheer off. You're not afraid of a dotty old man, are you?"

"No, of course not," said Paul, too quickly.

"Well, I am. That's partly why I came. When I opened my envelope with the first clue this morning, I was scared stiff. You see—oh, I haven't time to explain: but, when you're afraid, you ought always to go and face it out straight away. And I'll feel quite safe with you."

"That's all very well," Paul tried to turn it off lightly. "But I've got a trespassing-phobia. I——"

"Oh, come on. He doesn't *own* the wood. Anyway, all these people tramping around are sure to have driven him off."

Sally vaulted the stone wall, crossed the road and entered the wood, Paul following stiffly behind her. The wood, as is the way of woods, closed at once behind them—enclosed them in a silence which had become more profound yet queerly attentive, as though forces lurked there—neutral at present—but ready any moment to take offence and action. Paul was obsessed by a feeling that this had happened before, or was going to happen again. Each leaf, each sun-dappled space of the wood's floor, concealed an obscure threat. The silence here was so eternal that past and future seemed to have no meaning: you felt compelled to challenge the silence by breaking more noisily through the tangle of undergrowth and whippy branches across the path. Pausing, her hand on his shoulder, to let him unfasten a bramble shoot that had hooked her jersey, Sally said:

"You're pale. I believe you really are windy." Her voice was childish: not contemptuous; purely inquisitive.

"I hate trespassing," he answered stubbornly.

The wood was much larger than they had imagined. Little, overgrown paths hatched and cross-hatched it. You could walk for ever without finding what you wanted. A pulpy, acrid smell of vegetation rose all round them as they peered into the wood's dark recesses: the play of sunlight and shadow deluded them, creating a dozen mirages that might have been the hermit's camouflaged home.

"Oh, I'm sinking in!" the girl cried suddenly. Paul reached out, took her under the arms, and lifted her out of the patch of black mud.

"It's a bog. You should look where you're going," he said irritably, feeling the tremor of her body as she leant against him for a moment.

"Look, Paul! Look!"

She was pointing towards the farther edge of the bog, where a footprint—not hers—was plainly evident.

"That's him," she said. "We can't be far away now. I'm going to jump across."

"I'll carry you. Or perhaps we can find a way round."

"Would you like to carry me, Paul Pry?" she said in that childish voice. "We'd both sink in together, and nothing of us would be left but two poor little topknots. Wouldn't it be romantic?"

"It'd be loathsome. You'd better jump."

They both leaped across the intervening bog. Sally whispered:

"Isn't it exciting! I've always wanted to be in the Secret Service. A beautiful female agent, like Mata Hari. Look, there's a bit of mud he left behind. And the ferns are bruised here—this is the way."

A few moments later they emerged into a tiny clearing. A shack stood there, weather-worn, chinks stuffed with paper, its tattered roofing of tarred felt crowned by a piece of stove-pipe stuck out at a drunken angle like the clay pipe from a stage Irishman's hat. Now they had found it, it did not seem sinister—only shabby and rather pathetic. Though there was no evidence that the recluse was not at home, Sally walked round to the front of the shack without hesitation and peered in at the single, broken-paned window.

It was too dark. They could see nothing. Sally tried the door, expecting it to be locked, but it creaked open at once.

"There you are," said Paul, irritable with relief. "If he had any guilty secrets, he'd be certain to keep that door locked. Now we can go home, thank God."

"Not yet. Keep guard, if you're afraid to come in."

Paul stood beside the doorway, one eye apprehensively on the wood, glancing from time to time at Sally, who was rummaging amongst the rag-and-sack bed, the old newspapers, the rusty cooking utensils that ministered to the simple-lifer's life.

"It's no good. I can't find anything. Phoo, they're smelly!"

"Now perhaps you'll be satisfied."

"Don't be a wet blanket!" Sally looked quickly round the cabin. There seemed no possible hiding-place. Unless—— She poked her hand up into the cavity in the roof that held the stove-pipe. Her hand came out again, sooty and empty. In reaching up she had stood tiptoe on the earthen floor, just where it was blackened in a circle by the mark of many fires. It took her a few seconds to realise that the floor had a different feel just here. Then she was on her knees, scrabbling amongst the litter of ashes, feeling the hidden bricks that made a firm fireplace beneath, lifting out the bricks, lifting out something that lay beneath them.

She took it towards the light. Paul was peering uneasily at her. It was a metal box. She opened it, pulled out a sheaf of yellowed press cuttings: they were reports from the local paper of the controversy that had been waged over the Wonderland holiday camp. Impatiently she flipped through them. They told her nothing she did not know already. But the last cutting seemed very fat, and when she shook it out a number of photographs fell from it.

"Look, Paul," she said, "look!"

They were aerial photographs, and one of them presented—in clear and sunlit detail—the buildings, the grounds, the whole lay-out of Wonderland.

Chapter VIII

"No," Sally was saying a minute later. "We must put them back exactly as we found them. Otherwise he'll be on his guard."

It was she now who showed anxiety, as though that photograph of Wonderland had brought another picture too clearly before her eyes—the picture of a grey-bearded man already plodding towards them through the wood, a Mad Hatter full of malice. She put the metal box in the cavity, carefully laid the bricks over it and covered them again with the ashes and charred sticks.

" 'Exactly as we found them'?" asked Paul. "What about those photographs? Are they wrapped up in the right order?"

"Oh hell! I don't know—they all tumbled out—let's hope he doesn't notice it. Come on, Paul, I've got the jitters."

She gave the shack a last look round. Closing its door, they plunged back into the wood. Sally took his hand: hers was blackened from the chimney and sooty ashes, cold even in the midsummer heat.

"Oh God, I hope we get out of the wood without meeting him."

"What's come over you, Sally? He wouldn't—ssh!"

A strange, rusty, tuneless humming sounded through the trees. The pair were frozen still, on the edge of the boggy patch: they dared not move; if they turned off the path into the undergrowth, the noise would betray their flight. This is what the rabbit feels like, thought Paul, as the ragged, grey-bearded figure, bent under a heavy sack, humming like rusty clockwork, advanced upon them. Now they were confronting each other. At least, the bog was between them.

"Good-afternoon," said Sally, a little tremulously, holding her dirty hands behind her back.

"Who are you? Where have you come from? This wood is private, don't you understand?"

The voice was soft, yet harsh. His words came out reluctantly, as though the recluse had lost the habit of human speech. The dark, smoked glasses over the grey beard gave him the unnatural aspect of an effigy that children have strung together out of oddments from a cobwebbed attic.

"We got lost," said Sally. "Can you tell us the quickest way back to the camp, please?"

"The holiday camp?" That halting, unused voice rose to a sort of crow's croaking. "You come from the camp? Get out of here! Get out, I tell you!"

"We will, if you'll let us pass."

Sally made a move, as if to jump across the bog. It seemed to infuriate the old scarecrow still more. He released his sack and, with a rather dreadful animation, began flapping his arms and making little runs at them, stopping short on the bog's margin each time. Sally could not stand any more of this: that crow's voice, those flapping black arms—there seemed no reason why he shouldn't leave the ground and flap across the bog at them. She turned and fled back up the path, Paul close behind her . . .

The treasure-hunt was not yet over when they returned to Wonderland. Sally had been unusually silent on the way back, and her silence seemed to convey to him that he had been inadequate, a disappointment.

"Well, what could we have done?" he said at last. "Arrested him on the spot? We haven't *proved* anything yet."

"You needn't have run away like that."

"You ran away too."

"That's different."

"I see. Women and children first. I ought to have fought a rearguard action, I suppose? And you ought to have brought your Teddy Wise with you, if you wanted a nice, story-book hero on the spot," Paul replied bitterly.

"Oh, let it go, let it go."

It was with considerable relief that he narrated the episode to Esmeralda Jones, whom he found in the manager's office. Here was a woman who didn't regulate her life by the canons of behaviour laid down in twopenny library romances: a sophisticated, intelligent woman, definitely his type.

"That photograph of the camp is suggestive, of course," he said, encouraged by her sober attention and dispassionate gaze. "And he did look rather—well, rather disguised: the beard might have been a false one, but all beards look false nowadays. Anyway, he obviously can't haunt the camp in those frightful rags he was wearing, and we didn't find any other clothes in the shack."

"He might easily have a cache somewhere else, Paul. No, I think we should go into this thoroughly: you can't get away from it—he's got by far the best motive we've struck so far."

"Who has?" asked Captain Wise, entering with a sheaf of papers under his arm, his brother behind him.

Paul told them the gist of the story, adding—"the tricks played so far certainly seem in character with a half-crazed, spiteful, rather childish old man, but I still think——"

"It'd be a good thing for us if these tricks turned out to be engineered by someone outside the camp, don't you think, Miss Jones? I wonder could we let drop a few hints pointing that way. It'd revive the *esprit-de-corps* a bit."

"Are the visitors beginning to check out, then?" asked Paul.

"There's no real exodus started yet," Captain Wise replied evasively. "Oh, by the way, the Mad Hatter has filled in a questionnaire paper."

"What?" Paul exclaimed.

Captain Wise passed one of the sheets over to him. It was signed, in block capitals, "THE MAD HATTER," and he had answered the questionnaire in a lamentably frivolous manner: as for example:

Q. vi I am Trotsky in disguise.
Q. vii Makes things more exciting, of course, you silly chumps.
Q. viii Call in the military, the British navy, the Archbishop of Canterbury and Old Moore if you like, but it won't do you any good.
Q. ix Kidnap Miss Jones.

"Not sure he isn't right there," said Captain Wise, laying a finger on this last item. "Can't imagine anything that'd disorganise the camp more. We'd better give you a bodyguard, Miss Jones."

"You're not taking this seriously, are you?" Paul asked.

"Bless your heart, no. As it happens, three different people have replied over the name of the Mad Hatter. That sort of joke's contagious."

Teddy Wise who, resplendent in white flannels, had been sitting on his brother's desk juggling with a paper-weight, an india-rubber and a golf ball, swivelled round quickly.

" 'Contagious.' There you are. That's just what I've been telling you all along. Some bird plays a practical joke. A lot of to-do is made about it. Several other birds—neurotic, I suppose you'd call 'em—feel they have to compete too. Like those slashings up in Yorkshire a few years ago. Chap slashes a wench—probably got a very good reason for it: then several other chaps hear the call independently and sharpen up their razors and totter around slashing out right and left quite regardless."

Captain Wise tapped his teeth with his gold pencil, gazing at Paul: "What d'you think of that theory, Perry?"

"I'm not sure," Paul replied slowly. "I suppose the flaw is that it was announced over the loud-speakers and then a notice put up on the board. That suggests a single individual behind the jokes."

"I know I'm not awfully bright," said Teddy; "but *why* does it? The loud-speaker Johnny does the duckings and the first treacle act——"

"And somebody else, happening to have a tin of treacle by him, decides to doctor the piano?" said Miss Jones ironically.

"Oh well, chap A does the piano as well as the tennis-balls. Then chap B weighs in with strychnine—"

"Of which, by a fortunate coincidence, he happens to have brought a supply in his suitcase——"

"All right, all right, all right. I resign." At the door Teddy Wise halted a moment. "I say. *If* the hermit is the Mad Hatter, and *if* he suspects Miss Thistlethwaite and Perry here of having got the drop on him—well, it won't be too good for the wench, will it?"

"You'd better run along and guard her then, Teddy," said his brother abstractedly. "Tell the staff to keep a special look-out for unauthorised people in the grounds. Especially for an oldish man, not wearing a beard, with a harsh voice——"

"—And otherwise answering to the description of Hermann the Hermit. O.K., boss, we'll set the mighty organisation to work."

"Miss Jones and I have been through these questionnaires," said Captain Wise as if there had been no comic interlude. "If you'd like to take 'em off now—— Fertile imaginations, some of these people have."

"Shall I have tea sent to your chalet straight away?" Miss Jones inquired with a demure glance.

"Thanks very much."

Back in his room, Paul began to collate in a note-book the answers to the first part of the questionnaire. Voices of returned treasure-hunters came to his ears:

"I got ever so dirty, trying to——"

"Did you have the flag-pole clue, too? I don't know how they think of them. . . ."

"It wasn't fair. Gertie and Bob had a much easier——"

"Well, somebody had to win it. . . ."

"My friend got stung by something."

"Adder, I expect. She was stung by an adder, which made her much sadder, and——"

"Give over, do, that's me you're pinching. . . ."

"Sally went off with that Mass Observer gentleman. D'you think——?"

Presently the last voice died away, and Paul could work without interruption. After an hour, the results of the first five questions were tabulated. Three hundred and seventy-one papers had been returned, a very fair proportion considering the distractions the visitors had had. Paul sat back and reviewed the results. He noted with special interest that they had voted in almost equal proportions for gregariousness, luxury and cheapness, and novelty, as the reason for preferring a holiday camp to lodgings at an ordinary resort; that only 39% believed that the luxury of Wonderland would dissatisfy them with their normal environment; that only 11% ever felt a desire for solitude, whereas 83% approved of the extent to which their recreations were organised in Wonderland.

For once, though, he found it difficult to concentrate on statistics. An unaccountable depression, a vague dissatisfaction overcast his mind: these percentages, these carefully worked out plans of investigation—they seemed now a grasping of the shadow and missing of the substance. Yet what substance was there in this unreal microcosm that lay about him? How could you map out life so fluid, so erratic? In this camp there were five hundred people: they did not stay long enough to form special habits; each of them was a particle, drifting from one recreation to another, forming up with one group of particles, then as lightly detaching itself and drifting towards a second. The older people, and those who had brought families of children, did stick together more consistently: but for the majority the camp was like a huge children's party where you romped incuriously with any one and every one, often not even knowing the names of your playmates of the moment, your games organised and benevolently supervised by a few rather shadowy grown-ups.

It was this, Paul realised, which rendered so difficult not only his own research but the management's efforts to lay their hand on the Mad Hatter. A feeling of impatience, of contempt almost, for the raw material of his study came over him. Such a feeling, he knew, was deadly sin for an Observer: and besides, though he would reject with contumely "organised games" in the public-school sense, he approved of them theoretically when he could see them as "mass recreation" in a holiday camp. Yet the feeling of impatience persisted. There was that puritan hidden deep within him, which was exacerbated by the spectacle of so many people irresponsibly enjoying themselves. At first he had liked the sensation of being outside it all—the impartial, detached, observing machine. Now, he just felt shut out, a figure prowling resentfully around on the outside of a magic circle.

There was a knock at the door and Sally Thistlethwaite entered.

"Hallo," she said, peering with frank curiosity at his note-books. "The great man at work."

"Hallo."

"What's the matter? Your face is as long as a wet week. Come and play something."

"I'm busy."

"That means you're expecting the Jones along, I suppose."

"You can suppose what you like."

"Won't his home-work come out right then?" she said, peering over his shoulder.

"Don't be so childish."

Sally went out at once, slamming the door behind her. He could hear her calling out to Teddy Wise. A moment's irrational panic seized him: they were both coming back to bait him: he remembered things that had happened at school: or perhaps she would set the nit-witted tough on him. He slipped quickly out of his chalet and walked away towards the main building.

Furious now with himself and every one else, he wandered through the various playrooms. In one, a table-tennis competition was proceeding: in another, Mr. Thistlethwaite was playing billiards—or rather, with hieratic gestures, blessing a large break on which his opponent was engaged: in a third, several parties of young people were noisily occupied with pin-tables, darts and shove-halfpenny. Paul watched them for a little, vaguely aware that the semi-official position which his questionnaire had given him in the camp somehow kept him outside their circle. They grinned at him, friendly enough, but at the same time their attitude was a little self-conscious—as though he were carrying a portable microphone with him and broadcasting their fun as a feature programme to the world.

Paul wandered outside again, past the tennis-courts, over to the fun-fair. This was another project by the Wonderland directors to go one better than all existing holiday camps. It was particularly popular with the children, for it contained slides, bumper-cars, a merry-go-round, a coco-nut shy, swings and the like. At the moment, however, it was comparatively deserted, since the gong had just rung for the children's six o'clock supper. A group of adults stood at the end of the shooting gallery, and it was evident from their shrieks of laughter that fun was being had by all.

Walking up to them, Paul found that Mr. Morley was the cause of their merriment. Beside the ordinary target practice, the shooting gallery provided more dramatic sport: a luridly coloured jungle panorama from behind which, if you inserted a penny in a slot, cardboard lions, tigers, giraffes, rhinoceroses and wild boar emerged and moved with spasmodic jerks across your field of vision. Albert Morley, squinting horribly down the barrel of a Winchester .22 repeater, was attempting to pick off these cardboard fauna. The shikari, one had to admit, was enjoying singularly ill-luck; for the game always seemed to take one of their concerted leaps a fraction of a second before he fired. However, even if they had remained stationary, it was doubtful whether Mr. Morley would have hit one: his habit of shutting tight his eyes just as he pressed the trigger did not conduce to good marksmanship.

Paul soon perceived the reason for this uncanny sense of anticipation on the part of the big game. Each time Albert Morley prepared to fire, the group behind him glanced towards the side of the booth. Teddy Wise stood there, carefully watching Mr. Morley's trigger finger: as it flexed, Teddy jerked a small handle which operated the cardboard animals. It was evident that Mr. Morley, a very deliberate marksman, had already used up his pennyworth of sport, and Teddy was manipulating the jungle effects by means of a handle normally kept locked.

It's odd, reflected Paul as he watched this performance distastefully, that you cannot go on laughing at someone beyond a certain length of time without your laughter turning malicious, going bad on you. It had started as clean fun: Teddy had probably unlocked the handle and given it a turn in a spirit of generosity, so that Albert could have a few more shots after his pennyworth was exhausted. But the crowd had spotted him, secretly egged him on, and Teddy could never resist applause. And now they were all laughing in a different way. It was not pleasant. Even Teddy looked rather apologetic, when Mr. Morley had finished shooting and they all explained to him why his bag amounted to nothing.

Albert Morley, indeed, came out of it best. He blinked uncertainly, looking from Teddy to the others, blushed, ducked his head once or twice with that odd little mannerism of his, then beamed all round, declaring that he wasn't much of a shot and ought to have tried some target practice before going out after the big game. Yes, Mr. Morley could always be relied upon to take things in good part—to turn a joke sweet again, as you might say. Taking up another rifle, he moved across to the target alley. Teddy Wise, a little ashamed, no doubt, of his thoughtless prank, took Albert in hand, showing him how to aim and how to squeeze the trigger without jerking the rifle: but the shots still only found the outermost circle of the target, Paul noticed before he moved away.

On his way back to the main building he was confronted by the two girls he had sat next to at the concert. Phyllis Arnold was looking more awkward and unhealthy than ever: her friend Janice had to prod her forward and act as spokesman.

"Oh, Mr. Perry, pardon us intruding," she said breathlessly, "but I think Phyll—Miss Arnold ought to see a doctor."

"Well, there's one here. The camp doctor. You'd find him——"

Janice Mears drew him aside, leaving her friend standing dismally on the gravel path, hands tucked into the wide sleeves of her white tennis-coat.

"I know," she said. "But she's so stubborn. She's a Christian Scientist, sort of. I thought perhaps you might be able to persuade her. She's taken quite a fancy to you, see?"

Oh Lord! thought Paul. This is preposterous. Couldn't she be content with the Left Book Club?

"What's the matter with her?" he asked.

"She's got blisters. Ever so big. Here, Phyllis, show Mr. Perry your blisters."

Flushing painfully, the girl came up to him, uncrossed her arms and pulled back the sleeves of her coat. On the forearms there were several blisters, nearly as big as golf-balls.

"Good God!" exclaimed Paul in a shocked voice. "How on earth did you get these? When did they come?"

The girl began to snivel wretchedly. Her friend spoke for her again.

"They came up quite soon after she got back from the treasure-hunt."

"You've not been experimenting with mustard gas, by any chance?" Paul asked lightly.

"Why, Mr. Perry, of course I haven't," said Phyllis Arnold. "Whatever made you think——?"

"They're the sort of blisters it gives you, that's all. You must have burnt yourself. Primus or something, was it?"

"But I didn't burn myself. They just came."

"Oh well, never mind, the doctor'll soon put them right. Shall we drop in on him now?"

"I wouldn't care to see a doctor, thank you very much all the same," said Miss Arnold, with the sheepish, self-martyring expression of the weakly obstinate.

Paul thought quickly.

"I quite understand," he said. "One must respect your convictions. But I think you ought to let the doctor see. There might conceivably be some epidemic of these things, and we ought to have them under observation at the start. Think of all the other people in the camp. After all, you needn't have them treated, if you don't want."

The girl accepted this unscientific and far from ingenuous piece of pleading: she was in evident pain as they walked towards the doctor's chalet.

"This is Miss Arnold," said Paul, when Doctor Holford opened the door to them. "We thought——"

"Yes," broke in Janice Mears. "She's got some awful blisters. Mr. Perry says they're from mustard-gas."

"Don't be absurd. I was only joking." Paul looked distinctly uncomfortable. The young doctor gave him a cool, appraising look, invited them in, and inspected the girl's forearms.

"Hmm," he said at last. "Nasty-looking chaps, aren't they? But nothing to be alarmed about. We'll just let out the fluid and put on some dry dressings."

Seeing Miss Arnold on the point of making her protest, Paul moved towards the door: he didn't want to become involved in a controversy about Christian Science.

"Perhaps you could call in again, Perry, in about quarter of an hour's time?" said the doctor quietly, not looking up.

"Certainly."

When the time was up, Paul returned to the doctor's chalet. Phyllis Arnold and her friend had already left. Dr. Holford offered him a drink and a cigarette. He came straight to the point.

"If you don't mind my asking, Perry, how do you come to be acquainted with the effects of mustard-gas?"

"A friend of mine at Cambridge, a chemist, was experimenting with the stuff and got a trace of it on his hand. But, look here, you're not really suggesting——"

"I don't mind telling you I'm puzzled about those blisters. The fact is, they do exactly resemble mustard-gas ones. Of course, it's fantastic: but the girl can't give any account of them. 'They just came,' she says. One wouldn't think twice about it, but for these other things that've been happening in the camp."

"But, surely you have to spray the stuff. It'd be impracticable——"

"Inside the camp, perhaps. But don't forget the treasure-hunt."

"If it was done somewhere along the treasure-trail, more than one person would have been affected."

"I'm quite aware of that." Like many of his profession, Dr. Holford disapproved of laymen infringing upon its mysteries. He went on, in a more distant voice, "And, by the way, I don't think it was wise on your part to mention mustard-gas in front of those two young ladies. I did my best to pooh-pooh the notion; otherwise it'd have been all round the camp by now."

It soon was. It would have taken a stronger-minded person than Miss Janice Mears to keep such a good thing to herself. As soon as she had persuaded Phyllis Arnold to lie down, she sought out her particular boy-friend of the moment and told all. In half an hour, so ripe for rumour had Wonderland become, half the camp knew that the Mad Hatter had struck again—this time, with poison-gas. The casualty list quickly mounted from one girl with blisters to a dozen, a score, fifty visitors at death's door. The evening dew was falling, but its healing properties were lost to-day: a different, a poisonous dew was in people's minds. They glanced at each other doubtfully, furtively examined their own flesh, like men in a plague-stricken town.

At this point Mr. Thistlethwaite gathered together all the members of the Sports Committee he could find, and they went in a body to the manager's office. Captain Wise, who had already heard the rumours, was evidently as bewildered as the rest of them. The mustard-gas theory would no doubt be soon disproved: Dr. Holford was an able young man and he had every confidence in him: but meanwhile the damage was being done. Did they not think it was time for him to call in the police? Miss Jones suggested that this would only heighten the general panic; but Captain Wise, perplexed and irritable, snubbed her unmercifully.

Then, after a good deal of heated but fruitless discussion, Mr. Thistlethwaite took the floor. Let a compromise be made, he pronounced weightily: they did not want the publicity that would be attached to police intervention, but at the same time they could no longer remain inactive in the face of a menace that struck at the heart of the community. Let them employ the services of a private detective. He himself, as it happened, numbered one such among his clientêle: a thorough gentleman—that went without saying—and a brilliant investigator at the top of his profession: a Mr. Strangeways. Mr. Thistlethwaite might be able to induce him to take up the case, if he happened to be at liberty just now. The committee approved of this decision, and in a few minutes Miss Jones was putting through a trunk call to London.

PART II

MR. THISTLETHWAITE MEASURES UP

Chapter IX

The next morning, after breakfast, Mr. Thistlethwaite took Paul Perry aside. They walked over towards the bowling-green, where already some of the older visitors were getting down to their sober rites, and sat on the grass terrace above. Mr. Thistlethwaite, evidently full of matter, was in no hurry to release it: the leisurely movements of the players, their no less deliberate badinage, the morning sunlight that had all the day before it—everything in sight suggested, like Mr. Thistlethwaite's own drill-clad bulk, *otium cum dignitate.*

"It was a relief, sir, that the fancy-dress dance last night passed off without incident."

"It was indeed."

"Well played, sir! A beautiful wood! I always think, Mr. Perry, that bowls is a peculiarly English game, exercising to the full—as it does—the qualities of patience, good temper, forethought and harmless rivalry. It is, too—correct me if I am wrong—the one national pastime which has not yet succumbed to the taint of professionalism."

"What about polo?"

"I was speaking, sir, of democratic pastimes," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with some severity. "Polo is a rich man's game. None the worse for that, you may say. Many of my gentlemen indulged in the sport—hard knocks and no ill-feeling—a manly game, without question. But not open to the masses, and therefore not to be specified as a typical English sport. No, sir."

"I suppose bowls does exemplify our national character," said Paul, playing up to the fantasy. "Making a virtue out of bias, for one thing. Reaching our objective by a devious route. That is what foreigners call 'British hypocrisy': but we know better: we know it is bowls."

"You are rallying me, sir, I perceive," Mr. Thistlethwaite replied good-humouredly. "Ah well, who would imagine, gazing upon this innocent scene, that the shadow of death overhangs it?"

"Who indeed?" Paul glanced at his companion's face, and saw that it had indeed assumed a funebrial expression. "But surely you don't think this Mad Hatter person would——"

"The Angel of Death may hover, sir. It is for us to ensure that he does not swoop."

"It sounds as if we needed an anti-aircraft gun more than a private detective."

Mr. Thistlethwaite waved this aside with an indulgent gesture—a gesture misinterpreted by Albert Morley, who was walking on the far side of the bowling-green, as a royal invitation. He came round to them, bobbed anxiously once or twice, and sat down on the grass nearby. It was typical of his indecisiveness of mind that he neither sat near enough to include himself in the group nor far enough away for them to be able to ignore him.

Mr. Thistlethwaite eyed the little man speculatively for a moment, then addressed himself to Paul.

"We were speaking of death, sir," he pronounced in sombre tones. Mr. Morley started, his head shying away from them like a jibbing horse's.

"Death," continued Mr. Thistlethwaite, "the greatest Demagogue of all. Hem. Now, sir, as one trained to accurate observation, you are at a great advantage in estimating the psychological reactions, the general temper and morale of a community. Would you say that there has been any marked change amongst us here since yesterday?"

"Well, I think people are feeling a bit ashamed of the panic they got into last night. And, when people feel that kind of relief and humiliation, they're apt to take out their irritation on someone else."

"Quite. A sagacious observation, if I may say so. People are looking for a victim, a scapegoat. Pray proceed."

"There's also a noticeable closing of the ranks. *Esprit de corps* is rearing its ugly head."

"Not perhaps the terms in which I should express it myself, but undeniably true. The presence of a public enemy in our midst, which at first created mild annoyance and curiosity, then mutual resentment and suspicion, has now brought us to a third stage. Those who were loudest in clamouring that the management should take action, and in blaming its inefficiency, are now the first"—Mr. Thistlethwaite, with a benign nod of the head, sanctioned his own colloquialism—"the first to rally round. Miss Gardiner will serve as one instance. Captain Wise—I say this from inside knowledge—is being positively embarrassed with offers of assistance. Aside from which, the generality of visitors, who might well have been expected to—ah, as young Mr. Wise would put it—to clock out in droves, are now feeling it a point of honour to stay on and outface the aggressor. Let him beware," Mr. Thistlethwaite concluded, "who thinks to twist the lion's tail too far."

"Aren't we wandering rather far from the subject of death?" asked Paul.

His companion's eye followed the course of a wood which, carrying acute bias, swept up the green, curled round the obstructing screen of bowls and came gently to rest against the jack.

"Sir," he said, "however far we wander, we cannot get away from death. However, let us by all means return to our muttons. My argument tends towards this conclusion: suppose the Mad Hatter's outrages were aimed at demoralising the visitors and thus damaging Wonderland itself: this effect has signally failed of achievement; the miscreant cannot fail to have realised it by now, and we might therefore expect a cessation of hostilities on his part, especially as it has been announced in public that the management has called in a trained investigator."

"Well, that'll be a relief for every one."

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised a minatory finger. "But this hypothesis may be wrong. It is possible that these outrages are aimed finally at a single individual."

"Oh, but surely, I mean to say——" protested Albert Morley, who had been bouncing about on the grass in evident impatience.

"Allow me to pursue my argument. Let us suppose that I have a private motive for wishing to murder you, Mr. Morley——"

Albert stared at him, pale, transfixed, horrified.

"—or vice versa," conceded Mr. Thistlethwaite. "How easy to carry out a series of practical jokes, the victims chosen at random; and then, having established an atmosphere of practical joking, to launch an attack upon the real victim. This would appear to be no more than another joke—one which unfortunately had gone too far. If carefully disguised, it would arouse no suspicion at all of deliberate homicide. What do you say, Mr. Morley?"

"I suppose it's possible. But this motive business—I mean, how could you ever find out——?"

"Yes," said Paul. "Amongst nearly five hundred people, it'd be the devil of a job to discover who had motives for murdering whom."

"We can eliminate a good many, sir. It is logical to suppose that the criminal worked out his plan of campaign before coming to Wonderland, which means that his prospective victim is not someone he has met since arriving here, but a person acquainted with him in ordinary life."

"You mean, if we could find out which of the visitors knew each other before coming here, the search for the criminal and his victim could be confined to them?"

"Just so. It is possible even that they are of the same family. Most murders are for gain: supposing X murders Y in order to profit by his will, the motive—in ordinary circumstances—is dangerously apparent;

the police need not look further than the family circle. But an apparently accidental death, the result of a misplaced practical joke which is itself only one of a series, taking place in a large community, would conceal such a motive most effectively."

"I dare say. But I still don't see how we can find out which of the visitors—apart from those who came with their families—answer your description."

"That's where your own services would be useful, Mr. Perry. You have a semi-official position here, which enables you to ask questions without seeming unwarrantably to intrude into private lives. There is also your questionnaire, on which people were asked to subscribe their names and addresses. An examination of these addresses would yield at least provisional results."

They decided to get to work on the questionnaire papers straight away, though Paul secretly believed that it would do little to narrow down the investigation. Mr. Thistlethwaite, by some strange reaction of mind upon matter, had already assumed the appearance of one of those solid, heavy-jowled, ordinary-looking men under whose photographs in the press you read the legend "Superintendent ——, one of the Big Five, who is in control of the investigation." Only the bowler hat was missing.

It was while they were engaged upon the papers that a man approached Sally, who was sun-bathing on the beach, and began talking to her in the free-and-easy manner of Wonderland. Lying on her stomach, scrabbling her toes into the soft sand, she did not at first give him more than a brief glance. He looked very much like any of the older visitors—grey flannels, sports coat, open-necked shirt, one of those old-young faces whose wrinkles and grey hair are contradicted by clear-cut features and a keen, mobile expression. His voice was pleasant, too—slow, paternal, somehow reassuring. Afterwards, when her mother mildly commented on the way she had conducted herself, Sally could only say that he'd seemed a perfectly inoffensive creature.

The two talked desultorily for a few minutes. Then Sally said:

"Be a sport and rub in some of this sun-tan oil, will you? I can't get at my back."

"You don't look as if you needed any."

"I certainly do. I've got to be a South Sea maiden in the cabaret tomorrow."

As the stranger rubbed in the oil, the conversation drifted round to the Mad Hatter. He had not realised that she was the practical joker's first victim. It must have been a nasty experience, being dragged under the sea. What had it felt like?

Sally chattered away happily. They discussed the other exploits of the Mad Hatter, and the way they had affected the visitors. Presently the stranger rose from his knees, rubbed his hands in a dirty handkerchief, and drifted off. As she looked up to thank him for his ministrations, Sally had subconsciously noticed something which did not come to the front of her mind till the stranger was already nearing the top of the cliff path.

He had not been wearing a Wonderland identity disk, that was it.

Well, of course he wasn't. Lots of people don't wear them down at the beach. Yes, but he wasn't bathing, he had no towel or costume with him. Oh, don't be silly. Yes, and he was an oldish man, grey-haired, and his voice sort of deliberate, like—— But the hermit's voice was husky, hoarse, quite different. That might have been assumed. Suppose it was the hermit, the Mad Hatter. All right, suppose it was; he didn't do you any harm, you poor, nervous ninny. He was very nice and kind. He even——

Sally's eyes fell on the bottle of sun-tan oil, upright in the sand where he had laid it down. She felt cold and hot and cold, as if she were swimming through the layers of chilly and warmer water out there in the sea. She thought she would faint, she wished she could scream, remembering what had happened yesterday to that other girl. Blisters. Mustard-gas, they'd all said, and Captain Wise had publicly denounced the people who spread such a silly rumour. But you could not decontaminate your mind from that rumour just in a few hours.

Oh God, she thought, holding up the bottle, desperately trying to remember how much there had been in it before—— Oh God, supposing it was something else he rubbed into my back, something out of a different bottle.

She shuddered. She could feel his hand again, rubbing gently but very persistently, the hand of that horrible old man who had flapped at them in the wood, the Mad Hatter who poisoned dogs.

In a moment she had braced herself hard against this undertow of panic. You didn't have to rub mustard-gas into people: and, if it had been acid—vitriol, or something like that—she'd have felt it burning at once: and it'd have burnt his hand too. But still, he may still have been the Mad Hatter, drawn back to the scene of his crime. He had no disk, he started talking about the practical joker—in a queer, interested, inquisitive way, almost as though he had not seen the effects of them himself and wanted to gloat over an eye-witness's account.

Sally leapt to her feet and swam out to where Teddy Wise was sitting on a raft. Breathlessly she whispered to him what had happened. His sleepy eyes came wide awake. They swam together, racing for the shore, hurried on their bathing-robes, scrambled up the steep path. Sally had no very clear idea of how they were to find the unknown man amongst all the crowd and buildings of Wonderland, but the mere physical action of keeping up with Teddy's long strides heartened her.

When they approached the main building and the recreation grounds, they discovered—if they had any attention to spare for it—the difference between running through a crowd of strangers and trying to make one's way through a mass of people who have already been tuned up to crisis. A smash-and-grab thief can nearly always get away to a good start, for the shock of his action creates a momentary paralysis in the bystanders. But the Wonderland visitors, who swarmed helpfully or inquiringly round as soon as they saw Teddy Wise and Sally running, made a formidable obstacle. In the end they had to stop while Sally, at Teddy's suggestion, described the appearance of the man on the beach. The visitors then scattered in search of him.

"Listen, Teddy," she said. "If he's the Mad Hatter and going around asking people how they enjoyed his fun, he may be talking to that woman whose dog he killed, or to the girl with blisters. Quick! Which shall we try first?"

They decided for Phyllis Arnold, whom the doctor had ordered to rest in her chalet. It was a sound decision. As they approached the chalet, Sally saw their quarry emerge from it. Nor did she have any more doubts about his guilt; for no sooner had he caught sight of them advancing, and before Teddy had shouted for him to stop, he was off and away, streaking down the avenue between the chalets.

"Go and see if she's all right," exclaimed Teddy, jerking his finger towards Phyllis Arnold's chalet. Reluctantly Sally obeyed him. The girl was reclining on a chaise longue, looking seedy and not a little startled.

"What are they shouting about?" she asked.

"Oh, it's just someone shouting," Sally replied vaguely: it would do no good to have the girl further alarmed.

"You sound quite breathless, Miss Er."

"I've been running." Sally, though young, realised by instinct that there are occasions when the truth is much more deceptive than any lie. "I thought I'd pop in and ask how you're getting on."

"It's very nice of you, I'm sure. Not that I'm ill, mind you. Not as you might say ill. It's all subjective, don't you think?" Miss Arnold pushed her arms deeper beneath the rug. "Still, I always say you don't know how sympathetic people are till you're down. Look at the way working-class people help each other. I don't know how many inquiries I've had this morning. There was a gentleman who left just before you came in—ever so kind he was—asked me all about how it happened, and wanted to see my scars—my arms, I mean."

"Did you show them to him?"

"I didn't want to, you understand that, don't you, dear? But he was so kind, it would have been like snubbing him. So I let him take off the bandages."

"Did you?" Sally's heart seemed to miss a beat. "Did he—do anything?"

"Do anything? He was most respectful. I wouldn't let a man take liberties."

"Did he touch them? The scars?"

"No, he just looked at them, that's all. Why?"

"Oh, nothing. Are those the bandages on the table? Oughtn't you to put them on again? Let me do it. Practise my First Aid."

"No, dear, thank you all the same. I mustn't give in to such weakness again. It's all subjective, you see."

"You mean the blisters weren't really there at all?"

"Not exactly that. But if I believe I'm well again, and have enough faith, I shall be well."

"But couldn't you have the bandages on and still believe that——?"

"You don't understand, dear," said Miss Arnold with exasperating patience. At this point Teddy Wise turned up, inquired after the invalid and took Sally off with him. The unknown man had escaped him, he said, running through the trees, clambering over the farm wall, and making off on a motor-bike: Teddy had not been able to see the registration number, and the chap would have been two miles away before he could have returned to the camp garage and got out his own car for pursuit. Sally told him what the stranger had been doing in Miss Arnold's chalet.

"If this chap is the hermit and the Mad Hatter," said Teddy, "it's hard to see what he was up to. He should have been buzzing around with more treacle, or whatever his next bit of dirty work is, not comparing notes with his victims."

"But who else could he have been? Why did he run away?"

"It beats me. The old head-piece simply cannot stand the racket. I say, d'you know anything about this detective bloke your dad recommended?"

"No. I've never even seen him."

"I always think of private detectives as furtive little blighters who can just reach up to peer through the keyhole. I suppose this one's a master-man, though—hawk-like eye, eight-cylinder brain and all that. Well, he'll need it."

"I wish I knew what really goes on in your head," Sally startled herself by saying. Teddy grinned his easy, modest grin.

"Damn all, if you want to know. But don't tell any one else."

Sally was conscious of having been politely but firmly warned off the grass. It irritated and puzzled her. She said:

"You take everything as a sort of game."

"Well, games are all I'm good at." He glanced at her self-defensively, a little wary but still good-humoured, like a boxing instructor whose pupil has landed on him with unexpected violence.

"But you can't go on playing games all your life."

"It'll be time enough to worry about that when I've got a middle-aged spread, athlete's heart and fallen arches, my good wench."

Sally could not resist the impulse to break through his good-humour: there was a delicious feeling of temerity in baiting him—he was so strong and handsome—she half-wanted him to hit back.

"But surely you want to get on and do something," she said. "Something better than playing rounders with knock-kneed girls. You must have some ambition."

"Oh, I leave ambition to Mortimer. One big noise'll be quite enough in the family. Why this sudden solicitude for my future, anyway?"

"I don't like seeing people wasting themselves, I suppose."

"Life is real, life is earnest, what? Sounds to me as if you'd been having some propaganda pumped into you. Our Mr. Perry, was it?"

"Don't be ridiculous. Anyway, he does at least take his work seriously."

"Oh, but don't I? Our games organiser is the most conscientious little worker on the staff. Always bright, always on the spot to help you over your difficulties, Wonderland's leading ray of sunshine. Which reminds me, I'm supposed to be officiating at the tennis tournament this morning. And I must toddle off first and report to my bro on the sinister bloke we've just chased off. Always on the go. A selfless life, dedicated to the cause of others. Cheerio, Sally."

At that she had to leave it. As she strolled over to the notice-board, to see what time she was booked to play in the tournament, Sally took stock of herself. The fright she had got this morning, together with the atmosphere of uncertainty and unreality which the Mad Hatter seemed to have cast over Wonderland, had sobered her up. For the moment, at any rate, she could not take either herself or others at their face value. It was a queer sort of holiday: it had been queer from the word go, from the first time Paul Perry had spoken to them in the train, treating her with a stand-offishness she had never met with in any other young man. I could get him if I tried, though, she said to herself: and I could get Teddy, but not so easily. I wonder what this Nigel Strangeways will be like? Why, I never even asked daddy if he was married: I must be losing grip.

Chapter X

Nigel Strangeways came to Wonderland with a mind that was not only open but quite empty. His brief conversation over the telephone with Mr. Thistlethwaite had told him no more than that funny business was going on in the camp: some sort of practical joker, on the face of it, though Mr. Thistlethwaite had hinted at darker things and wheels within wheels. Nigel had not had time even to make inquiries about Wonderland Ltd. before setting off: nor had he the least idea what a holiday camp was like.

He was certainly unprepared for the vast, Hollywood-like structure that met his eyes as the car drove up through the park. One of the Wonderland staff had been sent to meet his train, but Nigel was too much exercised about something else to ask many questions during the drive. He was worrying, to be explicit, about his suit. Clothes did not normally bulk large in his preoccupations; but, when you were going to meet Mr. Thistlethwaite, for whom clothes did very much make the man, you began to regret money that might have been spent on trouser-press, coat-hangers, cleaning and pressing.

The grey, pin-striped flannels he was wearing had certainly been made by Mr. Thistlethwaite. But they had been made several years ago, since when Nigel had got into the habit of patronising ready-made tailors. Would Mr. Thistlethwaite have forgiven this desertion? If he had not, Nigel was in for it. Though it was more than twelve years since, a callow undergraduate, he had first timidly entered Mr. Thistlethwaite's establishment, his awe of the great man was little diminished. Shuddering slightly, he recalled that occasion—the first and last when he had ventured to dispute Mr. Thistlethwaite's judgment. It was on the question of buttons. Nigel had wished for only two on the front of the lounge suit the tailor consented to make for him. Mr. Thistlethwaite had indicated that gentlemen were no longer wearing two buttons: three was the correct number. With rash and fatal obstinacy, Nigel had stood out for two. Whereupon Mr. Thistlethwaite had drawn himself up, expanded till he seemed to fill like an outraged deity the holy of holies that was his fitting-room, and pronounced:

"If you insist, sir, I will give you two buttons. I can only say"—Mr. Thistlethwaite's voice took on a note of glacial distaste—"I can only say that it will look very silly."

Nigel had capitulated instantly. Never again did he join issue with the tailor. But the incident had left an indelible trauma on his mind. To-day, getting out of the car, peering short-sightedly into the vast atrium of Wonderland, he felt the old wound begin to throb again.

Mr. Thistlethwaite was awaiting him inside. With the air of one veteran statesman receiving another at a peace conference, he advanced upon Nigel over the rubber floor, hand outstretched.

"This is indeed a pleasure," he boomed. "Unfortunate though the circumstances be."

"I hope you're well, Mr. Thistlethwaite."

"Thank you, sir. I keep my health." Mr. Thistlethwaite stood back a little, still grasping Nigel's hand. "I fancy we had the pleasure of making that suit for you."

"Yes. Er, yes. Worn very well, hasn't it?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite smoothed down a slight ruck under the collar. "A good suit, sir, I always say, remains an aristocrat to the end."

They stood in silence for a few moments, out of respect for this dictum. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite conducted him upstairs to the manager's office.

"Captain Wise," he said on the way, "will put you *au fait* with the situation. You will find him quite an agreeable gentleman, though we cannot approve of temporary officers, great as their services to their country in her hour of need have doubtless been, retaining their military titles in civil life. In a free democracy such as ours, we wish for nothing that savours of a standing army."

Nigel forbore to question the logic of this remarkable utterance. Presently he was seated in Captain Wise's best arm-chair, listening to an account of what had happened: Mr. Thistlethwaite had tactfully removed himself, but Miss Jones remained, supplementing her employer's statement when necessary from her own notes. The two obviously worked so well together that it surprised Nigel when Captain Wise suddenly rounded on the secretary over a quite trivial point. Wise mentioned that he had informed the visitors last night of Nigel's coming.

"You told them I was a private investigator?"

"Yes."

"If you don't mind my saying so, I don't think you should have done that. It's bound to hamper me a bit, especially as you want the inquiry to be done as tactfully as possible and without interfering too much with the normal camp life."

"That was a point I made too, you will remember, Captain Wise," said Miss Jones, crisply but quite respectfully.

It was then that Mortimer Wise turned on her. "Will you kindly remember that you're paid to be my secretary, not assistant manager!" he burst out in a harsh, nervy voice. "I'll ask your advice when I want it."

Miss Jones' shocked expression and the way Nigel was regarding his toe-caps seemed to make him realise that he'd been unreasonable. He apologised, but only to Nigel.

"Sorry, Strangeways. The fact is, this business is getting me down. I quite appreciate your point, but you must realise the difficulty of my position. The visitors have been getting very restive about what they called my inactivity. By rights I ought probably to have called in the police, but that would be exceedingly bad for Wonderland Ltd. Of course, we've been working quietly away at it, taking precautions, and so on; but we needed a rather more public gesture——"

"Flinging me as a sop to still the public clamour?" suggested Nigel, smiling gently.

"Well, a bit of that," Captain Wise admitted. "But of course I've every confidence that you'll solve our little problem as well. It's probably simple enough. I'm afraid I'm not cut out for a detective myself."

"You say you've taken precautions——"

"Yes. Members of the staff patrol the chalets at night now, and others keep an eye on this building. Then, we're particularly careful about—well, for instance, there's a cabaret show to-night organised by the women visitors: the staff take turns to guard the concert hall and the room back-stage where the dresses and properties are kept."

"You have implicit confidence in your staff, then? I noticed, when you suggested just now that these outrages might be an attempt on someone's part to damage the Wonderland company or your own position in it, you made no reference to the staff. Surely, if any one has a grievance, it'd most likely be one of them?"

"You'd think so, I agree. But actually our staff is extraordinarily happy—this isn't just advertisement eye-wash: they're well paid, the hours aren't hard, no one is under notice or anything like that. I don't see how there could be any grievance against the company. Against me personally—well, it's not for me to say: but you'll have full facilities for interviewing the staff, and I don't think you'll hear any complaints—first-hand or second-hand—about my treatment of them."

"Captain Wise is very popular with the personnel of the camp," Miss Jones interposed. Nigel was struck by the contrast between the intelligence of her eyes and the sensuousness of her lips. If I was Captain Wise, he thought, I should have some difficulty in treating her as a mere office machine. Maybe he doesn't.

"Supposing you're right," he said, "we're left with a choice between one of the visitors and this hermit fellow. We know the hermit has a grievance against Wonderland and there are certain indications—the aerial photograph, the unknown man who turned up this morning—that he may have been in the camp. If it's one of the visitors, the odds are that these outrages are bona-fide practical jokes or else the work of someone with a screw loose. You've already made inquiries at your central office and discovered that none of the visitors has ever been in the company's employment: unless, of course, someone is here under a false name. In any case, Wonderland Ltd. has only been in existence for three years, and within such a short time any grudge against the company could easily be traced."

Captain Wise nodded. "Yes, that sums it up very well." He glanced at his wrist-watch—a thin, gold, rather feminine affair, Nigel noticed—and suggested they should have an aperitif. Miss Jones removed her horn-rimmed spectacles, walked over to a shiny cabinet by the wall which Nigel had vaguely assumed to be a radiogram, and opened it to reveal a cocktail bar. The removal of the spectacles had changed her at once from the confidential secretary to the charming hostess: gracefully handling the cocktails, she might have been a woman who had never had to do a day's work for her living.

"They do you very well here," Nigel remarked. "Free drinks, private bar installed—or is that an addition of your own?"

"No. Supplied by the company. We get a few perks."

Miss Jones opened a filing-cabinet and took out some papers. "Here is some material you may find useful, Mr. Strangeways. A statement of the action we took after the first practical joke: a list of the people who were on the beach then, in the order in which they left it: and notes about people who were absent from meals at times when the outrages might have been prepared—I'm afraid these are very incomplete and won't be much help—we couldn't pursue that sort of inquiry very far without giving offence."

A waft of some rare, sophisticated perfume came to Nigel as she leant over his shoulder with the papers. He tucked them away in a pocket and took another sip of his excellent cocktail.

"I imagine you've got no definite suspicions of any one yet," he said.

"No. I must say I can't believe it's one of the visitors. This recluse I mentioned seems the likeliest bet at present. Have you got those copies of the press cuttings there, Miss Jones?"

The secretary took some carbon copies from the drawer and passed them over.

"This is a dossier of the controversy that took place over the building of the holiday camp. You'll find the hermit's evidence here—Philip Grebble seems to be his legal name, but every one's got into the habit of calling him Old Ishmael—and a few paragraphs about his private life; and here's a photograph Miss Jones managed to dig up, taken at the time of the controversy."

"Dear me," murmured Nigel, regarding the photograph. " 'His beard was grizzled,—no?' "

" 'It was, as I have seen it in his life, a sable silver'd.' " Miss Jones neatly capped the quotation.

"And the treacly tennis-balls. 'The old ornament of his cheek hath stuffed tennis-balls.' "

"I'm afraid I can't compete with that one," Miss Jones smiled.

"Out of *Much Ado.*"

Captain Wise glanced impatiently at them. "Well, perhaps you'll tell me what lines you intend to work on, Strangeways. Any help I can give you——"

"Yes. To be sure." Nigel was still staring dreamily at the photograph. " 'Now may Jove in his next commodity of hair send thee a beard.' I'd better look into Ishmael first. Can you lend me an ordnance map of the district? And I'd like to go over the course of the treasure-hunt."

"I'll get my brother to take you. He's our games organiser, and arranged the clues."

"You mean, he made them up?"

"No. He hid them at the various points. Miss Jones composed them. She has a literary turn of mind."

"She seems a paragon of the virtues," said Nigel gallantly. "By the way, why did you put one clue so close to where this recluse lives? Wasn't it rather asking for trouble?"

Captain Wise looked considerably disconcerted. It was his first experience of the direct way in which Nigel often leapt upon a weak spot. Miss Jones came to his rescue.

"I'm afraid it was my doing. Old Ishmael has been a bit of a nuisance to us. You'll read more about it in the report I've given you. I thought that, if we sent a number of the visitors routing round on the outskirts of his wood, he might pack up and go off somewhere else. He doesn't like his privacy to be disturbed. It was a sort of counter-attack—a stupid idea, really, I suppose."

"Why do you want to go over the treasure-hunt?" asked Captain Wise.

"To find out how this girl got the blisters, if I can. It seems more likely to have happened there than in the camp, seeing that nobody else was affected."

"But surely you don't entertain the notion that it had anything to do with mustard-gas? It's quite fantastic. She's not a healthy-looking girl, and Doctor Holford found out that she often gets skin-trouble."

"Mm. Still, blisters are not skin-trouble in the normal sense. There must have been some pretty powerful external irritant to create ones like these." Nigel set down his cocktail glass precariously on the arm of his chair. "Who put about this mustard-gas theory, anyway?"

"Well, you know the way rumours do crop up," Captain Wise replied slowly. He looked embarrassed: his instinct, thought Nigel, is to protect the customer. Miss Jones began:

"Mr. Strangeways has only to ask Doctor Holford——"

"I don't think I shall require you any more for the present, Miss Jones," the manager said frigidly. "You have the programme for to-night to duplicate."

Miss Jones reddened, threw up her firm chin and went out. Captain Wise looked at Nigel apologetically.

"I have to keep that girl down a bit. She's invaluable, of course, but sometimes she trades on it. You were asking?—Oh yes, about the rumour. Well, actually a young chap staying here, called Perry—he's a Mass Observer and doing a survey of the camp—he was the first to suggest mustard-gas. Tactless of him, but nothing more, I'm sure. The doctor noticed the resemblance at once, too. Unfortunately the girl has a friend who happened to be there when Perry came out with the remark, and I'm afraid she broadcast it."

"I see. Yes. Tell me more about your Mr. Perry."

Captain Wise gave an account of the questionnaire, and mentioned that Paul had struck up acquaintance with Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But I don't see that young man behind this business," he ended.

"The psychology of the practical joker is apt to be pretty odd, you know."

"Yes," said Captain Wise dryly. "So Miss Gardiner keeps telling us. She's a schoolmistress staying here."

"I think we may find that Miss Arnold's blisters are nothing to do with the case—not one of the practical joke series, I mean. But, if the Mad Hatter is quick-witted, he'd jump at an accident like this and do his best to give the impression that it *was* one of the series. If he was quick-witted *and* in deadly earnest, that is to say. And what could be better calculated to create panic than a rumour of poison-gas?"

"That's all very well. But there's not a suggestion of motive——"

At this point the gong boomed out for luncheon. "I've arranged for you to have meals with the guests. I imagine you'd prefer that?"

"Thanks. Yes. You don't eat with them yourself?"

"Not as a general rule. One has to be frightfully careful to avoid favouritism, and if I had a sort of captain's table——"

In a few minutes, Mr. Thistlethwaite was introducing Nigel to the other people sitting at his table—his wife and Sally, Paul Perry, Albert Morley. Nigel liked the look of Mr. Thistlethwaite's daughter: she struck him as being a little overwrought at the moment, but that was to be expected as a result of what had happened to her in the last two days. He wondered just what was behind her attitude towards young Perry: she would tease him unmercifully for a little, and then break off, and eye him in a covert, undecided sort of way when he was not looking. Nigel, too, was unobtrusively taking stock of the young man who had started the mustard-gas rumour. Dark, touchy, eyes a trifle protuberant, a trace of some Midland or Northern accent in his voice, features from time to time set in a scowl (concentration? self-consciousness? pugnacity? recurrent headache?), serious, not much humour, perhaps a bit of a prig, tougher perhaps than he looks, could be vindictive—Nigel enumerated his impressions as they came to him.

The subject of his observation leaned across the table and said to him abruptly:

"I thought amateur detectives only existed in books."

It was an ungraceful opening to a conversation; but Nigel guessed that it had been less deliberately offensive than characteristic of a person who tried to give himself confidence by assuming a blunt, dominating manner towards strangers. He replied equably:

"Oh no, they exist in real life too. I'm not an amateur, though: I get paid."

"By the hour, or by results?"

"That depends on the client. Normally, I ask a retaining fee plus expenses."

"And what sort of people do you get as clients? Ones who are afraid to call in the police?"

"Sometimes. Or it may be a person under suspicion by the police, or an arrested man whom his friends believe innocent."

"What happens if you're being hired to prove someone's innocence and you discover they're guilty after all?"

"I don't hire myself out to prove any one's innocence. I do it to discover the truth. If the truth turns against them, that's their look-out."

"It must be a wonderful feeling," Mr. Morley chipped in, "battling for a man's innocence, probing into the dark corners of human nature——"

"Especially when you get a nice, fat fee for it," said Paul Perry with a quick, nervous sneer.

Nigel was not one to let that kind of thing pass. Gazing steadily at Paul, he said:

"Is it me you disapprove of, or private investigators as a class?"

"I'm not disapproving anything. I'm just interested in facts."

"So, oddly enough, am I. And one of the first facts I have come across in this case is that you are being openly offensive. Several inferences might be drawn from this. We might infer, for example," Nigel continued in his most dispassionate voice, "that you are a person of naturally boorish disposition: or that you're rattled about something and trying to take it out on the first available subject: or that you have some reason to be frightened of me, and—in an attempt to put a bold face on your fears—are betraying those fears. Or perhaps you've just eaten something that disagreed with you."

"Golly!" murmured Sally Thistlethwaite, gazing wide-eyed at Nigel. "Send for the ambulance, somebody."

"Nevertheless," Nigel added, "in the course of your remarks, you made one which may prove quite illuminating."

Chapter XI

After lunch Nigel had a brief conversation with Dr. Holford, and then went off with Teddy Wise to retrace the treasure-hunt. Miss Arnold's partner on that occasion had been Mr. Easton, the live-wire young man on the Sports Committee who had suggested that the management should organise a competition for discovering the Mad Hatter. At Nigel's suggestion, they took Mr. Easton with them so that they should cover exactly the same ground.

"Just what will you be looking for, Mr. Strangeways?" the young man said as they made their way towards the place where the first clue had been hidden.

"To tell you the truth, I don't quite know. But Doctor Holford has satisfied himself that Miss Arnold could not have come by her injury inside the camp grounds; and the blisters came up after the treasure-hunt; so the chances are she got them somehow in the course of it. She didn't complain of being stung, or anything like that?"

"No. She couldn't, I suppose, being a Christian Scientist. Not rightly." Mr. Easton proceeded to recite the somewhat hackneyed limerick on this subject—a donnish limerick which consorted oddly with his on-the-spot, executive appearance, the lantern jaw, the tuft of hair that stood up like a parrot's crest above his forehead, and the cockney accent.

Presently he brought them to the first clue. It had been tucked inside the coiled halliards of a flag-pole that stood on a slight eminence three or four hundred yards west from the main building.

"Easy, this one was," commented Mr. Easton:

" 'Wonderland waves
Up in the sky:
Where the rope coils,
There lurk I.'

Not quite up to Shakespeare, Mr. Strangeways, is it?"

"Far from it," said Nigel, gazing at the green flag with *Wonderland* in white letters that hung limply above them. "Still, it served its purpose. Captain Wise must have fun working out these rhymes."

"Not my bro—he's no bard. It's Esmeralda who makes them up. His secretary."

"Of course. I remember, he told me that," said Nigel, who had never in fact forgotten it. He examined the coils of the halliard and the flag-pole. "No poison unknown to science here, as far as I can see. Lead on, Mr. Easton."

The next stage took them out of the camp grounds, farther westwards and along the cliffs. The cries of bathers came up to them, lazy and idyllic in the summer air, through the tangled wilderness of the landslide.

"Bad weather for the Mad Hatter," said Mr. Easton.

"Why?"

"Well, if it was raining, people'd be staying indoors and getting on each other's nerves, see?"

"That's true," said Nigel, who liked the young man's sprightly, sensible air. "Yet Pan was an out-of-door god, and he was the one who started panics."

"D'you reckon that's what he's out for—to start a panic? Why doesn't he do something a bit more sweeping, then? Set fire to the camp, for instance? Burn like fun, those chalets would."

"Hey," cried Teddy Wise humorously, "don't you start putting ideas in his head!"

"He'll have plenty to choose from by now, Mr. Wise. Half the people in the camp are talking about what he'll do next."

"Apprehensively? Or are they just interested?" Nigel asked.

"Well, you know what the public is like. They're going to have their three quids' worth all right, and for two pins they'd run a sweepstake on the Mad Hatter's next move. When you're on holiday, you quite enjoy a bit of excitement—gives you something to talk about back at work. But, mind you, I reckon plenty of 'em here'll not go to a Wonderland camp another year, especially the older ones and those who've brought their kids. They're not windy, exactly, but you can try any one too far, see?"

The second hiding-place took a bit of finding. Teddy Wise, of course, knew where it had been; but Nigel wished Mr. Easton to re-discover it for himself in the same manner as during the actual treasure-hunt. It involved taking cross-bearings between the distant mole of Applestock port, the just-visible top of the white Wonderland building, a church tower to the north and a gorse-bush not far from the cliff's edge. Nigel's eyesight was not good enough to pick out the first of these objects, but Mr. Easton, who kept up a running commentary on his own movements, explained that it was the eastward wall of the naval harbour.

No results were yielded here, so the three of them turned off inland towards the third hiding-place. It had not been difficult to pick up—the clue leading down a high, narrow lane, through a gate on which "Beware of the Bull" had been scrawled in red paint and as untidily crossed out, into a rectangular-shaped pasture. To-day, however, Mr. Easton seemed at fault once they had entered the field.

"It looks different," he muttered as they skirted the hedge that separated field from lane. "Not that I'd know parsley when I saw it, except on fish-balls. Miss Arnold's good at plants and such, luckily."

"Parsley?"

"That's what she said it was. I dunno. It's gone now. Hasn't someone been cutting the stuff on this bank?"

"Yes, they have," said Nigel. "Could you find the place you hid this clue, Wise?"

"Well, it ought to be just about here. In a clump of weeds—big, coarse-looking chaps—with white flowers. Parsley my eye, Easton. They're not here now, anyway."

"One of the varieties of wild parsley, I expect," said Nigel. "If there's been a hedger at work here since yesterday, he's almost certain to be about still. Can any one see him?"

Teddy Wise teetered aimlessly on his toes. "Don't want to butt in on the man at the wheel, but is this going to get us anywhere? I mean, an innocent wild flower, it wouldn't give you blisters, would it?"

"I don't think what's normally known as wild parsley—hedge-parsley, that is—is poisonous. But there's cow-bane and fool's-parsley, which certainly are—they're the umbelliferous tribe too: and there's cow-parsnip, which farmers often mistake for hemlock, but it's supposed to be harmless. You can't describe this stuff more accurately, can you?"

Teddy, however, was no more of a botanist than young Easton. Nigel was standing indecisively by the bank when a sharp click sounded not far away, followed by a round, vernacular oath.

"That'll be him. Caught his bill-hook on a stone," Nigel exclaimed. They went towards the end of the field, through a gap, and out into the lane which curved round just here. An old man, creaking with rheumatism, was in the act of bending down to pick up a whet-stone. When Nigel hailed him, he straightened himself up with the same cautious deliberation, as if any abrupt movement would cause his whole frame to fly asunder, and scrutinised the three of them in a somewhat hostile manner.

"They danged stones," he remarked without preamble. "Which of you young shavers have been setting stones in my bank. You'm ought to be ashamed of yourselves."

Nigel disclaimed any act of sabotage on their part, but the ancient was plainly incredulous.

"They sow tares in the wheat," he continued sombrely. "They come as an enemy in the night. I will root them out utterly, and they shall be for a hissing. Turned my blade, you'm have. Their brains shall be dashed out on the stones thereof."

"Was it you who cut the bank in the next field this morning?" asked Nigel.

"What if I did?" the old man replied suspiciously. "Be you from thic dommed Milk Board? Us can tend ceows without no rules and regulations from ee."

"No fear, dad. We're from the holiday camp," said Teddy.

"Holiday camp? Grracht!" The old man spat copiously on his whetstone and set to sharpening the hook. "Heathens. Runnen over th' filds stark naked. Might be the middle of Africa," he muttered.

"It's no good. You'll not get anything out of him," said Teddy.

Nigel, however, persevered. "Well, we're quite decently dressed, anyway, aren't we? When you were cutting that bank——"

"The Lord smote en with sore boils from the soles of his feet to the crown of his haid," quoted the ancient, inaccurately but sensationally.

"What's that?" exclaimed Nigel.

"Hast thou not poured me out as milk, and curdled me like cheese?" He giggled hoarsely. "That'll larn 'em not to flaunt their nakedness in the Lord's eyes."

After a prolonged conversation, that would have tried the patience even of stricken Job himself, Nigel caught the old man's drift. By his account it seemed that the "wild parsley," as he called it, was exceedingly poisonous just at this time of the year, when it first began to flower. He admitted that he himself had never been affected by it: but, when he was cleaning the banks at the flowering time, he always wore leather gloves and carefully protected his legs. He recalled the case of a maiden, some fifty years ago, who had picked some flowering parsley and died a week after in agonies which he rendered with full detail.

Nigel asked him to point out some of this "wild parsley." He did so: and Nigel, bandaging his hand in a handkerchief, pulled it up, gave it to Mr. Easton, and told him to take it straight back to Dr. Holford. He then drew Teddy Wise aside, and asked him if he would go to Brimscombe Farm, where the old man worked, and inquire about the reliability of his information.

Having thus got rid of his two associates, Nigel was free to put certain questions which he did not wish either of them to hear. The old man, when he was not wandering off down scriptural by-paths, showed flashes of considerable shrewdness. No, nobody from the holiday camp had talked to him about this wild parsley before: but it was a common belief in the countryside round about that the stuff was dangerous for one week of the year. Nigel turned the conversation to the subject of Old Ishmael. "He'm daft as a coney, but don't harm nobody," was the verdict. Nigel asked if any one from the holiday camp had been showing particular interest in the recluse lately, or whether the latter had made any departures from his normal mode of living. The old man answered no to each of these questions: he recalled, however, that just over a year ago a gentleman who was staying at Brimscombe Farm, a holiday visitor, had asked all manner of questions about the hermit.

When he judged that Teddy Wise would have left the farm, Nigel made his way thither and interviewed the farmer. A friend of his, he believed, had stayed at Brimscombe last year: he himself being in the district for a few days, thought he might walk over to the farm; he had a family, and was looking for holiday quarters where he could bring them next year. Farmer Swetenham, a cheerful, robin-eyed, chubby man, pressed him to a mug of cider. He and the missus liked children about the place, as long as they remembered to shut the gates and didn't chivvy the stock. Not that their last visitor, Mr. Strangeways' friend, had brought his family. A quiet, civil chap he was: great on the bird-watching: took his field-glasses out on the cliffs most days. Yes, he had been very interested in Old Ishmael too. Wanted to go bird-watching in that wood up over, but Mr. Swetenham had told him the hermit didn't like people going about in his wood. He had suggested that the visitor, Mr. Black, should drop in at the Mariner's Compass in Applestock some Wednesday or Saturday. Old Ishmael was always there then, they said, and a bit mellower than usual, so he might give Mr. Black permission to go into his wood.

Nigel then brought the conversation round to Wonderland. Mentioning the treasure-hunt, he suggested that it was very good of Mr. Swetenham to let them go over his land. The farmer winked slyly:

"They buy a lot of their milk from me. I don't want to lose their custom, if you take my meaning. Still, I was a bit surprised when young Mr. Wise—he's just been in here—wrote and asked if he could put one of his clues in a field of mine. They don't generally go so far away from the camp grounds on these treasure-hunts, not to my knowledge."

"I suppose you told him whereabouts on your land he could plant the clues, so that the visitors wouldn't do any damage?"

"No. He suggested the Long Bottom field. I hadn't any cattle there this week, so I made no objection."

"I don't expect they'll be troubling you again. One of the visitors, a young lady, got badly blistered after the treasure-hunt. We've——"

The farmer laughed merrily. "Don't you believe it, sir. Young Mr. Wise has just been talking to me about it. Been listening to Joe Varley. That's a labourer of mine. He's got a bee in his bonnet about wild parsley. Well, it's the talk round here that the stuff's poisonous when it first flowers, but I've never known any one it hurt—nor beast neither."

Nigel took his leave of the farmer and walked back to Wonderland. There, after tea, he sought conversation with Dr. Holford. The doctor had examined the plant brought back by Mr. Easton, broken some of the coarse stalks and squeezed the juice over his own forearm. He was now awaiting developments.

"But I don't think anything will come of it," he said. "I examined some of the other people who were on the treasure-hunt and presumably routed about for the clue in the wild parsley, and they showed no signs of blistering. However, I'll send some of the stuff up to be analysed."

"Unfortunately the hedger had cut all the stuff in the field where the clue was hidden. He'd got a pile of hedge-cuttings about five foot high, and I couldn't very well bring it all back to see if any of it had been doped with something."

"There would have been no point in it, anyway. If some irritant poison had been sprayed on those plants, more than one person would have been affected. Miss Arnold's is plainly a case of idiosyncrasy to this particular plant."

"Yes, that's what I imagined. The hedger had a yarn about some girl years ago who died from the effects."

"Died? One would hardly—I shall have to keep an eye on Miss Arnold for a bit. Stupid girl—I found she'd left the bandages off when I went to see her before lunch. Wish I'd got some more of my books here. Of course, there are cases of idiosyncrasy to almost every kind of substance, but I'd like to see if any similar to this one have actually been recorded. It'd make an interesting article for the *Lancet.* But I'm sorry, talking shop like this. How does it affect your investigation?"

"Depends if Miss Arnold's idiosyncrasy had ever come out before, and if any one here could have known of it."

"I think I can answer that. I inquired if she'd ever had blisters of this sort, and she said no. Of course, having this Christian Science bug, she'd be bound to pretend that they'd never happened——"

"—Which rather invalidates her evidence. Easton said she was a botanist, and you'd expect that any one who went in for botany at all would have handled these plants some time or other."

"But, my dear fellow," said the doctor, "you realise what you're leading up to? If it was known that Miss Arnold had this idiosyncrasy, the only people who could have made use of the knowledge were——"

"Exactly. Miss Jones worked out the rhyming clues: Captain Wise and his brother no doubt helped with suggestions as to where the clues should actually be planted. Teddy Wise, I discovered just now, applied to the farmer on whose land Miss Arnold received her injury for permission to place a clue: he specifically mentioned Long Bottom, a field where this stuff grows."

Dr. Holford was plainly torn between curiosity and his own semi-official obligations to the management. Curiosity soon won. "But whatever motive could any of those three have for making Miss Arnold ill?" he said in faintly shocked tones.

"Oh, I've not got as far as motives yet. They're the spring of crime, certainly, from the criminal's point of view: but as far as the detective is concerned they're only a final polish on the finished article. But, theoretically, I could hand you several possible motives. The most obvious would be that one of the Wises, or Miss Jones, or a combination of them, is the Mad Hatter."

Dr. Holford gripped the arms of his chair and leant back, staring at Nigel.

"But that's fantastic. They'd be cutting their own throats, giving the camp a bad name. You can't seriously——"

He looked comically concerned. He's reflecting, guessed Nigel, what effect it might have on his career to be officially connected, even though remotely and by accident, with such a scandal.

"It's quite hypothetical," he said. "I have no reason at present to suppose that any of them could want to do the place down." He could not resist adding mischievously, "But, of course, Edward Wise may be jealous of his brother's position. You never know."

"Are you always as frank as this about your suspects—and *to* your suspects? I suppose we all come into that category," said the doctor slowly, after a pause. "I'd always imagined detectives kept their own counsel, or contented themselves with throwing out a few cryptic utterances."

"Like doctors?" said Nigel, grinning amiably. "I can be excessively cryptic at times. But frankness often pays. It's infectious, for one thing: if you talk quite unreservedly to a person, he assumes that you cannot possibly be suspecting him; and so he grows just a little careless."

"This looks bad for me," said Dr. Holford, not altogether comfortably. "Am I being grilled?"

"Well, you must agree that a doctor is much more likely to have strychnine at his disposal than any layman."

"Really! If you're suggesting that I poisoned that woman's dog——" The young man was now quite distinctly huffy. His remonstrations were cut short, however, by sounds of strife outside the chalet. Nigel opened the door, took a half-step forward, then checked himself, motioning Dr. Holford not to interfere.

Sally Thistlethwaite and Paul Perry were there, glaring at each other, standing in the tense, arrested attitudes of people in whom a quarrel is on the point of boiling over.

"You *were* laughing at me," she said.

"I was doing nothing of the sort, as it happens. Though that ridiculous costume you were all prancing about in would be enough to make a cat laugh."

Paul twitched open her tennis-coat, revealing the brassière and short imitation-grass skirt in which Sally had just been rehearsing the South Sea maiden dance for the cabaret.

"Don't touch me, damn you! You *were* laughing. You and that Jones creature, with your heads together, giggling like two silly schoolgirls. I saw you. Who said you could come in, anyway? Snooping as usual, I suppose?"

"Miss Jones said I could come and watch. It's part of my job, watching how people behave."

"Job, hell! You just wanted a free leg-show. Well, I hope you enjoyed it."

"If it's any comfort to you, you didn't look any more ridiculous than the rest of the troupe."

"So you *were* laughing at me. Both of you."

"I merely remarked to Miss Jones that the performance would be quite beyond the farthest Hebrides."

"That was damned witty, I suppose, if any one could understand it."

"Evidently you can't. It involves a quotation from Wordsworth, and the New Hebrides Islands in the South Seas. Miss Jones and I happened to be talking about the initiation ceremonies among the islanders there, before we came in. Now are you satisfied?"

"I suppose you spend quite a lot of your time with the Jones laughing at me? The two little high-brows having a good snigger together."

"I keep on telling you. We were *not* laughing at you in particular. It was just the spectacle of all those girls from Balham trying to go native.

The trouble with you is that you imagine every one is looking at you all the time. You're so self-conscious, it never occurs to you that we might have something more interesting to talk about than you. Not that any one mightn't feel self-conscious in that vulgar, sexy, mantrap of a costume."

Aha, so that's it, thought Nigel: and at the same instant Sally's hand struck Paul's cheek with a noise like a pistol-crack. He stared at her for a moment, bemused, almost appealingly. Then his face darkened, and he began shaking her furiously by the shoulders. The two had only just begun to struggle, when Teddy Wise came running up and sent Paul staggering aside.

"Has he been molesting you?" asked Teddy. "My brother told me to keep an eye on you, and it's apparently needed."

"He said my cabaret dress was indecent. So I smacked his face, and then he went for me."

"Oh, you did, did you?" said Teddy to Paul. "And what business was it of yours, may I ask?"

"Don't be so pompous. Sally started on me long before that. She'd got some absurd idea that——"

"I think you'd better apologise to Miss Thistlethwaite," Teddy interrupted menacingly, "or I shall have to teach you manners."

Sally's eyes, under her dishevelled hair, looked dark, frightened, yet fascinated and queerly eager. There was a slight quaver in Paul Perry's voice when he replied:

"You're not paid to knock the guests about, you know."

"Very true. But I'll do it without salary if you don't apologise instantly, little man."

Paul glanced desperately at Sally, who gave him back a cool, challenging gaze. Then he exclaimed, sulky, trembling, beaten:

"Oh, all right, all right. I apologise. You can call off your tame thug, Sally."

"But that won't do at all," said Teddy. "You must say it nicely, or else——"

"Pipe down, will you, Teddy!" Sally's voice suddenly broke, and crying out, "Oh, I hate you both," she began to weep.

"Oh well, now," said Teddy uncomfortably. Looking round as if for help out of this embarrassing situation, his eye caught Nigel standing in the door of the doctor's chalet. He seemed as if about to speak, but then strode off with hunched shoulders.

"I'm sorry, Sally." Paul's voice was infinitely dejected now. The girl walked away without looking at him. Nigel felt a certain sympathy for the young man standing there so miserably: he could not, of course, express it—Paul Perry was in a mood when sympathy would sound like an insult. Instead, Nigel approached him and in a business-like voice, as though he had not witnessed the scene, asked if Perry could spare half an hour to go over the work on the questionnaire papers which he had done with Mr. Thistlethwaite.

Nigel's friendly yet impersonal manner soon thawed the reserve that his snubbing of Perry at lunch had created. They examined the questionnaire papers together, Paul pointing out to him from a special list the names of all the visitors whose home addresses were in the same localities. After this, Nigel took him over the events of the last few days, since his arrival in the camp, paying particular attention to his account of his brush with the hermit during the treasure-hunt, and his dealings with the management. Paul had a very fair memory for detail, so that Nigel was able to build up for himself a pretty comprehensive picture of all the happenings in which the young man had played a part. Whether it was a truthful picture depended, of course, on Paul's own veracity: he was a trained observer; but he might also be the practical joker, in which case inconsistencies would appear in his account when Nigel reconsidered it.

"I don't know if this would be any help," Paul said after they had brought the case up to date. "It's the note-book in which I jot down all the bits of gossip I hear. I'm afraid it's almost useless to me for any survey of normal holiday-camp life, because this Mad Hatter has rather dominated the conversation. But you might get some ideas out of it."

"Thanks very much. It sounds just the thing."

"Oh, and by the way," said Paul abruptly, "I'm sorry I attacked you at lunch like I did. I can't imagine why—well, I suppose one's nerves are getting a bit jangled—it's the utter pointlessness of these practical jokes. One feels it must be a lunatic at work."

"A schizophrenic, perhaps? That's quite possible."

"Let's hope they stop, now that you've arrived. The chap may think better of it."

"Yes. Unless he's a schizophrenic. When your left hand doesn't know what your right's been doing——"

"I say, it's nearly dinner-time. I suppose I ought to put on a suit in honour of this leg-show we're being treated to to-night. . . ."

The ladies' cabaret was generally voted to be one of the greatest successes of the week. Many of the performers belonged to amateur dramatic or operatic societies at home: there was one genuine comic actress; a torch-singer, if you liked that kind of thing; a sketch or two performed by visitors who had been at the camp for long enough to allow rehearsals;

while the chorus of South Sea maidens made up in agility and tunefulness for what they lacked in looks or professional polish. Not that any great merit was required to ensure the little show's success. For the audience had evidently come prepared for intervention on the part of the Mad Hatter, keyed up to a more than normal state of excitement; and, when it seemed more and more likely that nothing untoward would happen, they let themselves go in relief and a kind of vicarious triumph.

After the show, Captain Wise invited Nigel up to his own quarters. Nigel gave a discreet account of his discoveries during the afternoon, deliberately conveying the impression that he still kept an open mind—as indeed he did—on the question whether Phyllis Arnold's injury had been a matter of accident or not. It was thin ice here, for the manager would surely realise that, if the injury was not accidental, it must point to those who had made up the clues. Captain Wise, however, seemed to skate over it easily enough. He pressed Nigel to drinks, and even accompanied him back to his chalet.

As the manager said good-night, Nigel sat down on his bed to take off his shoes. The next instant he had leapt up again with an exclamation that swung Captain Wise sharp round again.

"There's something in my bed!"

He flung back the sheets, to disclose the dead body of a rabbit. A very dead rabbit.

"God's truth!" exclaimed Captain Wise. "What the devil—it's the Mad Hatter again!"

"Yep." Nigel was much more interested in the manager than in the rabbit.

"Well, I'm damned! The fellow's got a cheek. In *your* bed, of all places." A faint smile showed at the corners of his mouth. "That's a direct challenge, Mr. Strangeways, if ever I saw one. In a way I can't help feeling glad he chose your bed and not one of the ordinary visitors'. They've had quite enough——"

But Captain Wise spoke too soon. He was interrupted by a suppressed scream from the next chalet. They ran outside, to meet a girl emerging with a dead rat held gingerly by its tail. The rat had been dead for some time, too. The commotion brought several more visitors to the spot, and a general searching of beds took place.

It was, all in all, probably the most bizarre scene Nigel had ever witnessed. The fairy-lights were still shining above the length of the chalet avenue, red, green, blue, white, yellow—giving just enough light to show the grotesque collection of corpses that were brought out one by one from the beds of the adjacent huts. Their stink began to permeate the air, as they lay in a row, the fairy-lights giving an iridescence to their shabby decay—two blackbirds, a stoat, a jay, three magpies, and a few shapeless bundles of fur or feather that had corrupted and shrivelled beyond recognition. Round these squalid remains pressed the little group of visitors, augmented each minute by fresh arrivals drawn hither on the strength of the rumour that was already flitting through the camp. They stood for the most part in silence, their nostrils wrinkled with disgust, and when they spoke it was in whispers and asides. One or two of the women still wore their cabaret costumes.

Nigel looked down at the dead creatures. Before long he realised what it was they reminded him of—the corpses you can see strung up in a line on a gamekeeper's "gallows," a warning to other marauders of nature, in some wood. In a wood . . .

Chapter XII

Waking at eight o'clock the next morning, Nigel's mind took up unbroken the thread of the night's activities. The Mad Hatter, he reflected, had certainly timed his last blow well. He must have smuggled the dead creatures into the various beds either at dinner-time or during the cabaret show, for otherwise their smell would have been detected by his victims while they were getting ready for dinner. At the same time, the fact that most of the visitors did not usually go to bed before midnight could be calculated to delay the ensuing investigation, since Captain Wise and Nigel Strangeways could not reasonably go inquiring all over the camp at so late an hour.

So, indeed, it had happened. The manager, after seeing that the victims of the outrage were supplied with fresh bed-clothes, had firmly vetoed Nigel's suggestion that they should begin making inquiries among the visitors straight away. "They wouldn't stand for it," he said. And Nigel had to admit the common sense of it. In any case, Captain Wise was paying for his services, so he had some right to call their tune.

It was after the group of onlookers had dispersed and an attendant had removed the animal corpses that Nigel hit upon the first clue. Captain Wise happened to comment upon the similarity of these corpses to the selection of dead things you find hanging on a gamekeeper's gallows.

"So you noticed it, too?" said Nigel. "It might be worth asking Perry if he came across such a gallows when he was in the hermit's wood."

"Well, you could try," the manager said doubtfully. "But that wood isn't preserved as far as I know, so you wouldn't expect to find a gamekeeper about there."

The two went along to Paul's chalet, and Captain Wise tapped on the window. He was still up, copying some material from one note-book into another. Nigel told him what had happened but he replied that he had not seen a gallows in Old Ishmael's wood. As they were conversing through the open window, Nigel's foot touched some object underneath the chalet, which was raised on brick piers a foot above the ground. He bent down idly and picked it up—a piece of thin wire a little rusted, about six feet long, with some tiny, dark bits of substance adhering to it.

"Nasty litter," said the manager, taking it from him and throwing it into a litter-basket that stood nearby. "Some of these people are incorrigible." He scratched the bridge of his nose with an irritable gesture. The next instant he was sniffing his fingers.

"I never touched any of those dead brutes, did I?" he said. "I seem to have got the smell on my fingers somehow, though——"

Struck by the same thought, he and Nigel both moved for the litter-basket. Nigel took out the wire, smelt it, held it up against the light from the window to examine the adhering particles.

"Well," he said at last, "here's the gallows anyway."

Paul Perry was still looking out at them, his elbows on the window-sill.

"What on earth did the chap put it here for?" he now asked, a touch of nervous defiance in his voice.

"Possibly one of the Wonderland staff saw him when he'd just finished planting the corpses, and chased him this way, and the chap thought he'd better get rid of the wire."

"I'll go and find out who was on duty near those chalets during dinner and the cabaret," said Captain Wise.

While he was away, there was a certain constraint between Nigel and Paul Perry. Finally the young man blurted out:

"Damn it, if I'd done the thing, I shouldn't have hidden that wire under my own chalet, should I? At least, I'd have put it somewhere else as soon as the coast was clear."

"I'd imagine so myself," replied Nigel non-committally.

Presently Captain Wise was back. Jameson, one of the staff, who had been keeping an eye on the chalets earlier in the evening, had noticed a figure going round to the back of Nigel's hut during the period when the cabaret show was on. He had assumed it to be Nigel—he was too far away to see clearly—and had, therefore, taken no steps beyond calling out "good evening." The figure had then disappeared.

"In what direction, did he see?" asked Nigel.

"Well, in this direction actually," the manager said, a little hesitantly.

"Go on! Why not say it? It must have been me." Paul Perry's voice, aiming at jauntiness, failed dismally.

Nigel, who had borrowed Captain Wise's electric torch, was shining it under the chalet.

"Why leave the wire there, and not the sack?" he muttered, dusting his knees.

"Sack?"

"Well, he must have had something to carry those corpses about in. He wouldn't march round the camp dangling them on this bit of wire."

Paul Perry reached out of the window and took the wire from Nigel's hand. Captain Wise made an instinctive step forward, as though to rescue this important exhibit, then halted. They were both gazing at Paul's face on which, unless the dim light deceived them, a very curious expression had come.

"Well, Strangeways, I'll be off. This is your pigeon, eh?" said Captain Wise at last, trying to conceal his irresolution under a light, dismissing tone. "Good-night. Good-night, Perry."

When he was out of earshot, Paul spoke. There was no longer any defiance or jauntiness in his voice, which now held nothing but the plaintive appeal of a child who wishes his mother to rescue him from a pain he cannot understand.

"Perhaps I did do it," he said, fingering the wire, staring at it as if painfully striving to remember whether he had seen it before. "A schizophrenic, you said. I thought of that, at the beginning. Well, how am I to know if I'm not the split personality? Suppose I've been doing all these vile, stupid things—my other self? . . . I had a nervous breakdown at Cambridge once. Overwork. I've been afraid ever since . . ."

Lying in bed this morning, Nigel considered the discovery of the wire and of Paul's weak spot. They must mean one of three things, he concluded. Either Perry was in fact schizophrenic, and the Mad Hatter his second personality: or Perry was sane, had been carrying out these practical jokes for some reason as yet to be discovered, and had thrown out the schizophrenic theory in a sort of self-defence when he found the chase so uncomfortably near his own doorstep: or the wire had been planted under his chalet so as to throw suspicion upon him.

But in that case why plant the wire only? Why not the sack, too? No, the wire alone would be a more subtle touch: if Perry was to be made appear the criminal, X might argue that Perry would never have left anything under his chalet so large and incriminating as the sack. Or perhaps it was because there was something about the sack, or whatever the receptacle had been, which would incriminate X. Yes, and this answered the question—why did Perry not get rid of the wire in the same way and at the same time as he had presumably got rid of the sack? Oh no, it didn't, though. Suppose Perry had disposed the animal corpses, heard the attendant hailing him from the distance, lost his head, run towards his own chalet, dived underneath it to hide—in the belief that the attendant was still following him? He would not dare hide for long, because presumably he'd have arranged some sort of alibi involving the cabaret show, and must get back to the concert hall as quickly as possible. So, in his haste to get rid of the sack, he might easily have overlooked the piece of wire: in fact, it might have slipped unnoticed out of the sack, which would be the natural place for him to put the wire after the corpses had been slipped off it.

This outline would fit the facts, always provided that Perry could not prove his presence in the concert hall throughout the whole of the cabaret show. But, if he was the Mad Hatter, how had he contrived to post up that notice on Sunday morning and yet be one of the last to leave the bathing-beach? Could he have slipped away so as to reach the notice-board after twelve o'clock, when the secretary had posted her notices, and got back to the beach unobserved? Nigel studied the paper on which Teddy Wise had jotted down for him the approximate times of the duckings. Sally Thistlethwaite, 11.15 a.m.; Albert Morley, 11.30; Mortimer Wise, 12.15. It was soon after this last ducking that the bathers had started returning to Wonderland, with Teddy taking down their identity-disk numbers or names as they left the beach. There was just time for the Mad Hatter to have put up his notice after twelve o'clock and got back for the ducking of Captain Wise. But surely somebody would have noticed him coming or going up the cliff path.

Nigel gave an irritable exclamation. Why hadn't the management made more extensive inquiries? After this lapse of time, you couldn't trust people's memories. Of course, Captain Wise had not realised then how wide the Mad Hatter's campaign was to be, and he had to exercise great tact with his visitors. But surely——

At this moment the management, in the person of Captain Wise himself, knocked at Nigel's door. He was evidently in a state of ill-repressed indignation.

"Look at this. This has torn it properly," he exclaimed, planking down a copy of the *Daily Post* on Nigel's bed. An inside page carried big headlines:

"OUTRAGES AT HOLIDAY CAMP

MALICE IN WONDERLAND

Who is the Mad Hatter?

"How the devil did they get hold of it, that's what I want to know. We took every precaution to see that nothing came out. I even made a public appeal to the residents. I can't believe that any of them would—the managing director has just rung me up and pretty well taken my skin off."

"If none of the residents sent up the story, it means you've had a reporter here."

"But I gave particular orders that no press-men should be admitted, without being sent to me first."

"You'd need a few companies of the Guards to keep the Press out of this place. No, I expect you'll find it was that chap who was chased off the premises yesterday morning: he seems to have had a good talk with Miss Thistlethwaite and the other Mad Hatter victims."

"By Jove, yes, you're probably right! I'll put a call through to the *Daily Post* at once, and find out. Wish we could sting 'em for libel, but those big papers look after themselves too well nowadays." Captain Wise made for the door, but suddenly halted on an afterthought. "I say, though, how did the *Post* hear about all this in the first instance?"

"The story is by 'our local correspondent,' " said Nigel, glancing at the paper. "Presumably somebody from here rang up the local paper—what is it?"

"The *Applestock Gazette* is the nearest."

"—and spilt the beans. The *Gazette* sends a reporter, and he passes it on to the *Daily Post* or some news agency. I must say, whoever did this story made a very nice job of it——"

"Here. Wait a minute. D'you mean one of the residents gave the show away? But why should he?"

"Cash perhaps. They might offer him a guinea or two for the information. Or quite possibly it was the practical joker himself who rang them up. He's got his publicity now, all right, if that's what he was after."

"And just about put the Wonderland company down the drain, too," said Captain Wise ruefully. "I'll get on to that blasted local rag now."

"I should wait till after breakfast. The editor isn't likely to be in the office till about ten o'clock."

Breakfast at Wonderland that morning was a feast of excitement. Those who possessed copies of the *Daily Post,* which had scooped the Mad Hatter story, were besieged by their fellow residents. The same interest that makes one read every word of the account of a football match, which one has witnessed only the day before, gripped alike the Mad Hatter's victims and those who had merely been spectators of his work. Even Mr. Thistlethwaite kept glancing aside from his copy of the *Times* towards his wife's *Daily Post.* At another table Miss Gardiner was triumphantly pointing out how correctly she had analysed the psychology of the practical joker: "A strong but suppressed sense of display is characteristic of the type," she repeated; "you mark my words—it was the Mad Hatter himself who sent this information to the paper; it's what he's been aiming at all along, to get recognition, to see himself in print."

"I see they've got my name in," said Mr. Morley with pride. "I must buy a copy of the paper. Something to show the fellows in the office. Bad thing for the camp, though; very bad: don't you agree, Mr. Perry?"

"D'you think so? I should have thought any publicity was better than none for a place like this."

"Oh, indeed no, if you'll excuse my contradicting you. As a business man, I can assure you that——"

"What I find interesting," Paul interrupted, "is the way every one is taking this story as a kind of personal triumph. And incidentally, the general assumption that the Press is omniscient, like God: every one takes the story for granted, I mean, without asking how the paper came to hear of it."

"I bet it was that man who rubbed my back with oil on the beach," Sally exclaimed. "I wondered why he asked all those questions, and he's got down some of the things I said—in almost the same words."

"I shouldn't be surprised if you were right," said Nigel.

"But that doesn't answer the question——" began Paul.

"Ooh, I'm glad it wasn't the Mad Hatter! I've been expecting to come up in boils ever since."

"Which would certainly have spoilt the South Sea effect."

"Did you like our dance last night? I thought it went much better than in rehearsal." Sally smiled at him. It was obviously an overture of peace.

"I didn't see it. Once was quite enough," said Paul stonily. Sally's mouth quivered as if he had struck her. Then she controlled herself and replied, in tones that matched his:

"That's funny, my pet. I should have thought you and your Miss Jones would have taken the opportunity of another hearty laugh."

"Actually, we took the air for a little, instead. Oh, and as Strangeways no doubt has got his ears pricked for an alibi, I must point out that Miss Jones was called away and I was *alone*—for about ten minutes."

"You did not spend that time, I take it, depositing dead animals in people's beds?" asked Nigel with equal effrontery.

"As it happens, no. I just smoked a cigarette and looked at the beautiful night. I felt I'd enjoy it more than the exposure of flesh that was going on inside. My error, evidently."

Paul Perry wiped his mouth, rose, and left the table.

"What a beast he is," Sally muttered self-betrayingly. "I wasn't wearing less than any of the others. Every one goes about like that in the camp."

"Exiguous though it may be," her father declared, "the modern female costume has the virtues of frankness and hygienic freedom. I should be the last to censure the modern girl on the score of immodesty."

Soon after breakfast Nigel repaired to the manager's office. Esmeralda Jones confirmed that she had gone out of the concert hall with Paul Perry before the South Sea maiden turn began, and had then been called away by one of the staff to answer the telephone. She pointed out, however, that no final conclusions could be drawn from this; for the interval had immediately followed this turn, and during the interval most of the audience had left the hall to take a stroll in the fresh air or visit one of the bars. Nor could the attendant, who had been on duty round the chalets, fix quite accurately the time when he had seen the figure emerge from Nigel's. All he could say was that he thought it was somewhere between 9.30 and 10, and this was elastic enough to cover both the interval and the South Sea turn.

During this conversation, Captain Wise flicked over the papers on his desk in an irresolute, dejected way. Nigel now suggested that they should ring up the *Applestock Gazette* and, Miss Jones having made the connection, waited for Captain Wise to speak. The manager, however, indicated the telephone, and said:

"You'd better handle this, Strangeways. I can't trust myself to speak civilly to them."

Nigel, accordingly, asked to be put through to the editor. He gave his name, said he was a private detective who had been called in by the Wonderland management, and asked if he might interview the reporter whom the *Gazette* had sent yesterday morning to the holiday camp. The editor was at first rather wary. Yes, he admitted presently, his paper was owned by the *Daily Post* company: possibly one of his staff had sent up the story: if Mr. Strangeways would look in at the office during the morning, he might be able to help him further.

"That's that. Could somebody drive me in? We'll take Miss Thistlethwaite, to identify the reporter if necessary. And Wednesday's the day Old Ishmael's to be found at the Mariner's Compass."

Miss Jones raised her delicately-pencilled eyebrows. "You don't still think that he——"

"I'm interested in a recluse who frequents pubs. There seems to be a certain contradiction. Do many of the visitors go over to Applestock?"

"When they go anywhere, they go there. But most of them prefer to stay in or near the camp, especially if they're only here for a week."

"Do you suggest one of them is an accomplice of this hermit fellow?" asked Captain Wise.

"Oh, I'm not embarking on any theories yet. There are so many loose ends in the case, the first thing is to get them tidied up."

Captain Wise deputed one of the Wonderland hostesses to drive Nigel into Applestock. Presently Nigel, Sally and Mr. Thistlethwaite were speeding out of the camp in the manager's Lagonda. Quarter of an hour's drive along the coast road brought them to the top of a hill from which they could see Applestock spread out below them. The old part of the town, a huddle of red-tiled houses close by the waterside, formed its nucleus. Westward there were the docks, warehouses and mole of the naval harbour, in which several warships lay. A modern sea-front stretched eastwards: while, straggling up the hill towards them, were streets of new houses, bungalows and shops—an index of the prosperity brought to the town by its naval establishment.

At the office of the *Applestock Gazette* Nigel alighted and, taking Sally with him, was shown up to the editor's room. Mr. Ainsley was a large man, lazy of movement but sharp of eye. After skirmishing with Nigel for a few minutes in a guarded way, and convincing himself that his visitor had come without hostile intent, he sent for Mr. Leeson, his senior reporter. Mr. Leeson lounged into the room, pipe in mouth, and cocked a quizzical eye at Sally, who at once recognized him as the stranger of the bathing beach.

"I hope the sun-tan is coming on nicely, Miss Thistlethwaite," he said.

There was a free-and-easiness about the office that seemed refreshing to Nigel after the formidable atmosphere of certain London editorial rooms with which he was acquainted. Mr. Ainsley gazed ruminatively at the ceiling while Nigel put his questions. Yes, Mr. Leeson had sent up the story to the *Daily Post.* He had gone over to Wonderland in answer to a telephone call received by him the evening before.

"Who was it rang you up?"

"No names were given. A man's voice, I'd say."

"Disguised at all?"

"Well, he didn't squeak or gibber at me. He just said there was some hoky-poky going on in the camp, gave me the names of the victims, said something about a Mad Hatter—I thought it was a hoax at first, but I'd nothing much on the next morning, so I came over. Oh yes, and he warned me that I shouldn't be very popular with the authorities, so I'd better not announce my presence. As it was, I got chased off the premises in the end. The story was worth it, though."

"Did any of the residents you interviewed suspect you were a pressman?"

Mr. Leeson looked slightly wounded, as if this were a reflection on his technique. He admitted, though, that one of the victims, Albert Morley, had asked him if he represented the Press. Nigel professed himself satisfied and turned the conversation to the subject of Old Ishmael. Did they know anything about him, apart from the controversy over the holiday camp in which he had been involved.

"We're the eyes and ears of Applestock and district," said the editor sardonically, cocking one leg over the arm of his chair. "What exactly do you want to know about the old eremite?"

"Does he fly, for instance?"

Sally started, remembering too vividly the flapping, crow-like figure they had met in the wood. The editor was taken aback, too.

"Fly?" he said. "He's not a wizard, as far as I know."

"I mean, is he likely to have taken trips in an aeroplane around here?"

"Christmas, no! He's dead against anything as new-fangled as an aeroplane!"

"Can you buy aerial photographs of this district—Wonderland, Applestock, and so on?"

"Yes. Except of the harbour, of course. No civil aircraft is allowed to fly over that nowadays."

"Has he changed his habits at all lately—during the last year, say?"

"Well, he comes into Applestock more often. It used to be only twice a week, Wednesday and Friday; you could set your calendar by him. Lately I've seen him about occasionally on other days. Nobody pays much attention to him, though. He's a local landmark and taken for granted."

Nigel thanked the editor for his information, and took Sally out again. Together with her father, they set out through the narrowing streets into the old part of the town, and after five minutes' walk reached the Mariner's Compass. It was an old inn which had recently been reconditioned, a brassy, pretentious, glazed-tile affair now. Entering the private saloon, they ordered drinks. By craning round the corner of a partition, it was possible to see into the public bar. Several bluejackets and warrant officers were sitting at round tables or in the high-backed oaken settles that had survived the modernisation of the pub. In a corner apart, on one of these settles, a large sack dumped on the floor beside him, sat Old Ishmael. There was a tankard of beer at his side, and he appeared to be sitting in a kind of stupor, his mouth munching a little from time to time, his eyes fixed trancedly upon a garish cigarette-advertisement on the opposite wall. He was an eccentric figure in that place; ragged, grey-bearded, wrapped in some private contemplation or merely suspended in vacancy: as Mr. Ainsley had said, nobody took any notice of him at all.

"Shall I go in and tug his beard?" whispered Sally. "If it comes away in me 'and, you'll know he's the Mad Hatter."

"You most certainly will do nothing of the sort," Nigel answered firmly. "Besides, a really good false beard won't come off as easily as all that. Spirit gum, my child."

Presently he got into conversation with the landlord. The Mariner's Compass, this man said, catered chiefly for seamen of one sort and another. Now and then holiday visitors dropped in, but the place was a bit rough for them sort, especially of a Saturday night.

"I see you've got Old Ishmael in there?"

"Yes. Regular as clockwork he drops in. Wednesdays and Saturdays. Buys his pint and sits there—for hours, sometimes. The boys offer him a drink now and then, but he never accepts it."

"Does he never talk to any one? I wonder what he comes in for if he isn't sociable and doesn't want to drink much."

"Living alone up in that wood, I suppose he needs a bit o' company at times. Drive me daffy, it would. No, the only time I ever seen him open his mouth, except to pour beer in, was last year. Just about this time last year, it would be. A gentleman, who was staying over to Swetenham's—that's the farm above the Wonderland holiday camp—this gentleman made him talk. Dunno how he did it. Bloody miracle, if you ask me, begging your pardon, miss. Yes, they were quite thick together, those two."

"What did they talk about?"

"I don't rightly know. Heard 'em on about the holiday camp one evening. The old 'un was evicted, you know, when they built it. I reckon this chap must've got on the soft side of Old Ishmael by cussing at them as promoted the camp."

Sally peered round the edge of the partition again. The recluse was still wrapped in his senile trance. Mechanically, as though some outside will had commanded it, his hand went out to the tankard: he drank, eyes still fixed on the opposite wall or some infinitely more distant horizon: his trembling hand replaced the tankard on the table. Sally felt a little gust of revulsion, as if she had been spying upon a monster that twitched in its sleep. Suddenly the swing-door of the public bar opened and a group of sailors came in, laughing and chattering. They were talking about dog-racing. One of them, a sallow, beady-eyed fellow in naval artificer's uniform, ordered drinks for the rest. He sounded as if it was not the first pub he had visited this morning.

"You got anything for Reading on Saturday, chum?" a companion asked him.

"Reading? There's a dawg running couldn't lose if yer put 'im on roller-skates. He's got it in the bag. In the bag, that's what I say."

"What's 'is name, chum?"

"Blue Blanket," the man shouted. "Put yer money on Blue Blanket and yer needn't never go to sea again. He'll make yer fortunes. Cor, Old Ishmael over there isn't listening. Put yer money on Blue Blanket, Ishmael, and buy yerself a new suit."

"He's deaf, chum. He can't hear yer."

"I'll write it down for him. Never keep a good thing to yourself, that's me, that's Nobby."

The man pulled a piece of paper from his pocket, wrote on it, and thrust it into the recluse's hand. Ishmael, looking up vaguely, caught sight of Sally's face beyond his benefactor's. An extraordinary croaking sound came from his throat: the next moment he had snatched up his sack and was out of the pub.

"Jees, that's Ishmael, that was!"

"Ain't 'arf in a nurry to place his bet!"

"Ooh, the naughty old man—gambling at his age!"

Sally turned a white face to Nigel, who was at her side. The hermit had given her only one look, but that was quite enough for her.

"Did you see——?" she began.

"Yes. I saw quite a lot. Let's push on, shall we?"

They walked up to where the car had been parked. As they drove out of Applestock, Mr. Thistlethwaite, who was sitting at the back with Nigel, cleared his throat and said:

"A highly significant interview, did you not think, sir?"

"Yes, indeed. Have you got a theory now?"

Mr. Thistlethwaite bounced with dignity as the Lagonda hit a rut.

"An alternative theory," he corrected. "I had previously suspected that these outrages were leading up to, and at the same time providing a smoke-screen for, a crime of a more deadly character. I do not at all, as yet, relinquish that theory. But the passages between the hermit and the unknown visitor—I allude, not to the naval person who was behaving in there with such lack of *savoir-faire* and common *politesse,* but to the visitor staying at the Swetenham farm last year—are susceptible of an interesting interpretation."

"You mean, perhaps, that the visitor for some reason entered into a conspiracy with Ishmael?"

"You apprehend me correctly, sir." Mr. Thistlethwaite beamed, then looked severely sagacious. "Why did the hermit, a notorious misanthrope, so quickly strike up acquaintance with an unknown stranger?

The publican heard them talking about the holiday camp. There is our solution, I submit. They both had reasons—different reasons, possibly—for wishing the place ill. They form a compact. They lay their plans. This week we are witnessing the fruit of their machinations."

"What reason do you suppose the other chap had? And what part is he playing at the moment? If he enlisted the hermit's aid, it must have been because he could not carry out the practical jokes in person, or unassisted at any rate. Which implies that the hermit has been doing some of them himself. Well, can you imagine that old bag of bones disguising himself as a Wonderland visitor and ducking people in the sea and all?"

"Well, sir. If you put it like that——" Mr. Thistlethwaite looked rather crestfallen. Sally, however, who had been listening, turned round from the front seat and said:

"I can. There's something phony about that horrid old man. I believe he could change his appearance much more easily than you think. There's something—I don't know how to describe the feeling he gives me—something *artificial* about him, as if he was put together out of horsehair and parchment and old door-mats."

"Yes," said Mr. Thistlethwaite, warming to his work again, "and the reason for the other fellow's complicity—well, it's a fact that several rival holiday camps would like to see Wonderland put out of the running: the man might be the agent of one of these. Or is my fancy soaring, sir, beyond the bounds of logic?"

"No," said Nigel slowly. "It's not impossible. Something of the sort may be going on."

Chapter XIII

Nigel directed the driver to stop at Mr. Swetenham's farm on the way back. There he revealed the real reason for his presence at Wonderland and made further inquiries about the mysterious visitor of last year. The farmer could give him little help. The visitor, a Mr. Charles Black, had certainly heard the gossip about Ishmael and his feud with Wonderland early during his stay. He had signed the visitor's book, but given as his address only "London": he was a reserved gentleman, the farmer remembered, though agreeable enough—talking little about himself. Nigel asked if Mr. Swetenham by any chance had a photograph of him.

"Funny you should ask that. My eldest kid took a snap of him when he wasn't looking one day. When she developed it and showed it to him, he got into quite a taking. Wanted to buy it off her first—the negative as well, I mean; then threatened to tear it up, joking like, saying he was so ugly he couldn't have photos of himself lying about the place for every one to look at. In the end he made her promise not to show it around. I dare say she'll have it still. She took a fancy to the gentleman, there's no two opinions about it."

Nigel persuaded the farmer to let him take away the snapshot and the visitor's book: he would return them as soon as possible. The signature might well be in a disguised handwriting, and it was not likely that Charles Black was the gentleman's real name: but the camera at least, which showed him in half profile an oldish, robust-looking, grey-haired man, could not lie.

Returning to the camp, Nigel first showed the photograph, without comment, to the Wise brothers and Miss Jones. None of them recognised its subject, however. He then asked Captain Wise whether it was possible that one of the rival holiday camp companies could be behind the outrages at Wonderland. The manager paused to consider his reply.

"It's not *im*possible," he said at last. "But it's improbable to the highest degree. The Beale people have got their knives into us, I admit—we've put them badly in the shade. But I can't believe they'd resort to such measures as these: it'd ruin them if they were found out."

"I'd like to interview your staff this afternoon, if it could be arranged. Every one who works in the buildings or on the grounds. Singly."

"That'll be a tall order. We can manage it though, I think. Perhaps you'd like to discuss it with Miss Jones now?"

Nigel and the secretary went into her office, that adjoined the manager's room. Producing a huge time-chart, which showed how every member of the staff was occupied at all times of the day, she rapidly worked out a scheme of interviews for Nigel. Her grasp of detail was quite remarkable: Nigel idly wondered how Captain Wise would fare with the organisation of Wonderland if his talented secretary decided to leave him.

"Do you like doing all this?" he asked. "I suppose you must, or you wouldn't be so good at it."

"It's a job . . . And it keeps my mind off other things."

"What other things? Or don't I ask that?"

The secretary's full, red lips curved down, in a kind of humorous self-pity. "Oh, the days that might have been. Vanished glories. I was Lysaght Jones's daughter."

"I see." Nigel recollected the crash, three or four years ago, of that brilliant, erratic financier, and his subsequent suicide. "So clever, he cut himself in the end," had been the general verdict on Lysaght Jones. His daughter certainly seemed to have inherited his genius for organisation—and a dash of the mischievous humour which had been his saving charm, Nigel suspected. Here she was, anyway, working for a salary that, a few years ago, might have paid for one of her fur coats.

"And don't tell me how much more ennobling honest toil is than my previous butterfly existence," she said. "I went through quite a lot after the crash—before I got this job. Old friends of my father who'd love to find something for the little girlie, if she'd just pay them something on account. The usual something. The only currency I possessed. No, it was *not* ennobling."

"Still, you've established yourself all right now."

"Until this damned Mad Hatter turned up. Now I shall have to start looking for a job again."

"Surely it's not as bad as that."

"This publicity's sunk us, my lad, don't you make any mistake. You should have heard Arbuthnot—he's the managing director—on the phone this morning. They can kiss good-bye to Wonderland, and he knows it. Poor Captain Wise—I don't know what he'll do if the place fails. They'd never give him another job, and he'll have nothing to live on."

As they talked, she was making out the order in which Nigel should interview the staff. She threw out her remarks spasmodically, in between the clattering periods of the typewriter. There was a certain contemptuous abandon in the way she worked, as if she didn't care whether typewriter, lists, files, office, and all Wonderland went to perdition the next moment. Now, tearing the sheet out of the machine, she said abruptly:

"For all that, I'd like to catch this bird, even if it is too late. D'you know anything about initiation ceremonies, Nigel Strangeways?"

"Not a great deal. Why?"

"Mr. Paul Perry does. He gave me a lecture on the subject yesterday afternoon."

She stopped, as abruptly as she had begun, took off her spectacles and began to make up her mouth. For all her air of insouciance, she evidently expected something from him.

"You mean, these practical jokes bear a strong resemblance to the tricks played by the older men on the youths during their initiation ceremonies in the New Hebrides, for instance?"

"I see you have points as a detective."

"You'd better tell me just exactly what you've got in mind."

"I don't want to throw accusations about. He seems a nice enough young man, if he is a bit of a solemn prig. Do we believe in the ruthless scientist, outside books? I don't know. Anyway, he's an anthropologist of sorts, batty about his job. He's never had the money or influence to get on to any expeditions. Would he try a little experimenting at home? I don't know. I'm just asking *you.*"

"Surely these practical jokes, and people's reactions to them, wouldn't make a very valuable scientific experiment? And he'd hardly go chatting to you about initiation ceremonies a few hours before he put dead animals in people's beds?"

"O.K., then. I'd much rather it was someone else than him."

"You've got something else in mind."

"All right. Why was he so keen to be allowed to see our part of the questionnaire—the answers about the Mad Hatter? They wouldn't contribute anything to his Mass Observation survey."

"Idle curiosity, perhaps."

"Is a scientist's curiosity ever idle?"

"That's an interesting point. Anything more?"

"Nothing you'd call evidence. But he's got a terrific puritan streak: he was quite devastated by the costume his young woman was wearing in the cabaret, for instance. And where would one expect a puritan to break out more violently than in a place like this, a Babylon of pleasure? Heaven knows, our pleasures here are chaste enough, except for a bit of to-and-fro between the chalets at night; but pleasure of any sort is enough to touch off a really hard-bitten puritan."

Presently Nigel left the girl and went thoughtfully across to his chalet. There, putting her suggestion out of his mind for the present, he wrote a letter to his uncle, Sir John Strangeways, Assistant Commissioner of Police. Sir John, his favourite uncle and guardian in boyhood days, was still his best friend: indeed, Nigel's youthful hero-worship of him had been an important factor in his own choice of profession. It was tacitly understood between them that Nigel should not trade upon Sir John's position, nor did he call upon his uncle for advice or assistance unless a situation seemed urgently to demand it. As head of the C. department of New Scotland Yard, Sir John had quite enough on his hands already. There were times, however, when Nigel could proceed no further with a case single-handed, and then he placed the facts in a memorandum before Sir John, who would decide whether they justified his lending unofficial support from his own organisation.

Paying no attention to the luncheon gong, Nigel now wrote steadily ahead. There was no need for him to give a full description of the earlier outrages: Sir John could find one in the *Daily Post;* for that matter, in spite of Mr. Leeson's bland assurances, there could be little doubt that the public would be kept well posted about each new event in Wonderland as well.

> ". . . So you see, my dear uncle," he concluded, "I have at present upward of four hundred single suspects—to say nothing of accomplices, which would create enough permutations and combinations to make even your head reel. Of course, most of these can in fact be reasonably ruled out, but I'm still left with a disagreeably large residue. The only tangible clue points to this Paul Perry, but I'm not altogether satisfied with the motive so far attributed to him. Then there's the mysterious 'Mr. Charles Black,' photograph enclosed. Have your boys got anything on him? Or, alternatively, can you find out for me whether he's connected with any of the other holiday-camp companies, in particular the one that runs Beale, which is Wonderland's chief rival? A third explorable avenue is our Miss Esmeralda Jones: an attractive, intelligent, and I should fancy a-moral young woman, who knows which side her bread is buttered on—and would prefer caviare to butter. Can you tell me whether any of the Wonderland directors were instrumental in the crash which brought down her father, Lysaght Jones? The revenge-motif is a possible one, if a bit far-fetched. But what isn't far-fetched in this dotty case. I'd like, too, any information you may have about Captain Mortimer Wise and his brother Edward. M's reputation is bound up with the camp's, one would pre-

sume; but one can't be sure. Any information will be gratefully received. Also, a chit to the local Chief Constable. I've not much time to work in, as great numbers of the visitors only stay for a week and on Saturday I must kiss good-bye to all these potential witnesses. (And why, by the way, has nobody witnessed anything yet except the *faits accomplis?*—I shall just burst into tears if this Mad Hatter continues to be an Invisible Man as well as a Menace to the Sanctity of the English Holiday.)

"Yours,

"NIGEL."

After sending off this letter, Nigel rang up his uncle and gave him the gist of it: the sooner he could get some concrete information, the better. Sir John promised to do his best. Nigel then ate a packet of milk chocolate and two apples which he had brought with him from London. He was depressed by a sense of anti-climax: even if he discovered the identity of the practical joker, the damage had now been done: Wonderland's reputation, if Captain Wise could be believed, was irreparably ruined. Nor was he himself an inch nearer to the solution of the problem: indeed, by so thoughtfully depositing the dead rabbit in his bed, the Mad Hatter had underlined Nigel's own impotence. Yet he felt that, if he could only correlate and interpret them correctly, he had already received enough indications to set him on the right track.

In the meantime, hard routine work would be the best cure for depression. Interviewing one by one the Wonderland staff took him till nearly five o'clock. The hosts and hostesses, the kitchen and domestic staff, the dance band, the gardeners, the odd job men—they seemed to come in an endless procession, and to leave him as puzzled as they found him.

When the last had gone, Nigel sat back to review the little information he had gleaned from them. It was desperately negative. The head-gardener produced a sack which he had found in one of the potting-sheds: it smelt unpleasantly, and was doubtless the one which had been used to convey the dead animals; but any one might have got into the shed, stolen and replaced the sack. He was a native of this part of the country, and could give Nigel particulars about the preserved coverts in the neighbourhood, so that, if the animals had come from a gamekeeper's gallows, they could be traced back to it. But this, Nigel imagined, would be of little assistance: for the odds were that the Mad Hatter had collected them by night, and cached them somewhere near the camp till the next night came: he must have done so unobserved, or the gamekeeper would have got him. For what it was worth, this supported the theory of an agent, or at least an accomplice, outside the camp. One of the staff, or a visitor, would run a certain risk carrying a sack about, even at night. Whereas Old Ishmael and his sack were such familiar features of the landscape that nobody would pay them much attention.

The dance band and their leader agreed that, when the lights went up after the first public pronouncement of the Mad Hatter, the last pair to be eliminated—Miss Jones and her partner, Paul Perry—were nearer to the microphones than any one else. But this meant nothing. Had either of theirs been the voice that had come through the loud-speakers, you would expect them to have put a greater distance between themselves and the microphones before the lights went up. Nobody yet had a convincing alibi for this moment except Teddy Wise and Miss Thistlethwaite, who were under the spotlight towards the far end of the hall. Miss Jones had already told Nigel that, when she and Paul were counted out, they separated in the darkness. So either of them *could* have done it. But so could any number of others in the hall, to say nothing of a person entering through the side doors by the platform.

Nor did Nigel obtain any relevant information about the duckings. Two or three of the staff, as well as the Wises, had been on the beach at various times that morning. They had not noticed any one climbing the cliff path or returning around midday. Nor were they at all agreed as to who had been nearest the victims at the time of the duckings.

After asking each member of the staff a series of more particular questions, Nigel inquired whether he knew any one who had any sort of grievance against the company or management, whether he had seen any of the visitors acting at any time in a suspicious or even unusual manner, and whether he had heard any gossip amongst the visitors suggesting some special knowledge of their own. Nigel hoped for some result from this last question at any rate, since these residents would not be likely to have maintained any of the upper-middle-class reticence before servants.

Yet, in spite of this, he gleaned little. The answers to the first question were remarkably unanimous: there was no doubt that, as Miss Jones had said, Captain Wise was thoroughly popular with his staff. As one of the waitresses put it, "he's a real gentleman—makes you feel it's a pleasure to work for him and the camp, listens to any complaints you have, and never goes behind your back. Reckon he's the making of this place—ought to pay him a much higher salary than they do, that's what I say." Nor did any one reveal, or appear to be trying to conceal, a grudge against the company.

The only item that made Nigel prick up his ears was an apparently irrelevant comment by one of the hostesses. "The only person in this camp who might fairly feel a bit annoyed with us is that funny little chap, Mr. Morley. 'Albert,' every one calls him. They're always ragging him about something or other, but he's as good-tempered as——"

" 'Annoyed with *us,'* you said. Do the staff go in for teasing him, too, then?"

"Oh, of course not, Mr. Strangeways. Captain Wise'd be down like a ton of bricks on that. Why, on Sunday morning he stopped his brother, and Teddy was really meaning no harm."

Nigel elicited the story of the beach-ball baiting, and later, from another witness, the episode in the shooting-gallery. They didn't, he reflected, amount to much, even after he had discovered that Mr. Morley had been equally a general butt on his first visit to the camp last year. This might have created in the little man a feeling of resentment towards his fellow visitors and Teddy Wise, and Nigel did not assume that a man who apparently takes a joke in good part may not also be taking it very much to heart; but it was difficult to imagine Albert Morley retaliating in this grim and wholesale manner: besides, Nigel remembered now, Albert had an alibi for the period when the dead animals were distributed, for Mr. Thistlethwaite had mentioned jokingly in the car this morning that he and Mr. Morley could vouch for each other over that—they having sat together at dinner, adjourned to the bar afterwards, sat beside each other during the cabaret, and smoked a cigarette together during the interval.

The answers to Nigel's second question added up to exactly nothing. His third produced little evidence either, except of the solidarity, the community-spirit which communicated itself to the staff as well as the residents of Wonderland. Most of his witnesses were quite evidently uneasy about repeating any gossip they might have heard which was likely to do further damage to the camp. The only exception to this meritorious unhelpfulness was the chief saxophone player in the dance band, a rather greasy and self-assured young man with a small black smut of a moustache, who commented knowingly:

"Gossip? We don't have no scandal here, old man—I *don't* think. All boys and girls together, and does that go for the management or does that go for the management?"

"Well, does it?" asked Nigel distastefully.

"I'm not talking, old man. If Cap Wise likes to keep his bit of sugar on the premises, that's O.K. by me. We're not living in the Middle Ages, are we?"

"Bit of sugar?" queried Nigel, leering horribly. "What price a nice big Emerald?"

"I don't get you—oh, I see. Emerald. Esmeralda. Trust the good old sleuth to sniff it out. Mind you, old man, they're discreet. Take a letter, Miss Jones. Certainly, Captain Wise. But they can't fool Artie Foscuro. It'd burn you up, if I told you what I'd seen——"

"What was it Miss Jones didn't like about you?" said Nigel with chilly emphasis. "Your manners? Or that disgusting moustache?"

"Here, old man, draw it mild——" Artie's voice degenerated from bogus American to whining Cockney. "I mean to siy——"

"Say it somewhere else. Good-afternoon."

Before the saxophonist had gone, Nigel was reproaching himself. He disliked very much people who took a high hand or a moral tone with chance witnesses. Hadn't I asked for gossip? Why then talk like a heavy house-master when I got it? The reason is, reflected Nigel, who seldom missed an opportunity for catching himself out in intellectual dishonesty, partly that I am getting irritable over the cumulative futility of all these interviews, and partly that I must be feeling a shade protective towards Esmeralda Jones myself. And when a man begins to feel protective towards a woman, it's high time for someone to start protecting *him*.

When the interviews were over, Nigel decided that as a penance he would read through the note-book in which Paul Perry jotted down the gossip he picked up in the camp. It was a penance, however, which had to be deferred, for he had only just opened the note-book when Dr. Holford entered, looking worried.

"I'm not at all satisfied with Miss Arnold's condition," he said at once. "The scars left by the blisters are unusually fragile, and the silly girl left off her bandages yesterday morning, she now admits. To tell you the truth, the wounds are septic. And she's not got much resistance. I think she ought to be removed to hospital."

"I see. Yes," said Nigel, after a pause. "Is she willing to go?"

"That's the trouble."

"Would it be all right for me to have a few words with her alone? I might be able to persuade her."

"Certainly. It's very good of you."

Phyllis Arnold was looking flushed, and evidently in pain, when Nigel went to visit her. She still, however, refused obstinately at first to consent to the doctor's plan.

"It's a matter of principle," she said.

"We respect you for it. But the fact is you may be safer away from the camp. It's possible that you are the real object of this series of horrible jokes."

"Oh, Mr. Strangeways, whatever do you mean?" The girl was alarmed, but also gratified—the effect Nigel had been aiming at. It was not often that life gave her the opportunity of being the centre of a picture.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you any more." (That is true, at any rate, thought Nigel.) "But you'd be doing me a great favour, if——"

"I'll do it, then. I always say the good of the community ought to come before one's private scruples—don't you agree, Mr. Strangeways?"

"I think this is an instance when it should, anyway. Now I just want to ask you a few questions and then I won't disturb you any more. Please tell no one, *absolutely* no one, what I have asked you."

"I promise." Miss Arnold's flush was now at least partly one of excitement.

"First, did any one in the camp, staff or residents, know that you would be susceptible to this wild parsley stuff or to blood-poisoning? Could they even have heard about it from someone outside the camp altogether—in your family or your office, say?"

"Really, I don't think so. Only my friend, Janice, that is. You see, we didn't know any of the other visitors, not till we came here. Janice knew I had blood-pois—I mean, what the doctor called blood-poisoning, two years ago. But I've never touched any wild-parsley before. Mind you, I'm ever so keen on botany. But I don't approve of picking wild flowers—I always say they ought to be left where God put them."

"I see. Well then, have you any reason to suppose that either Captain Wise, or his secretary, or his brother, could have a grudge against you. Don't be shocked at the idea. I have to ask these questions, and they often lead to nothing. Just think hard."

"Oh, no, Mr. Strangeways, I'm sure that's quite impossible. Why, I'd never even met any of them before——" The girl stopped suddenly. "Not as you'd say, met."

"Yes?" Nigel murmured encouragingly.

"Well, I did *see* them once—Captain Wise and Miss Jones, that is. My uncle took me to a restaurant in Soho for dinner, a few months ago. They were dining there. I didn't know who they were, of course; but I happened to notice them because Mr. Leyman was sitting at the next table, and leaning across to chat with them. He's connected with holiday camps, too—Mr. Leyman, I mean. I knew that, because he came into our office one day—I work for an architect's firm—and this Mr. Leyman had come to look over some plans."

"That all sounds harmless enough. Captain Wise could scarcely have a grievance against you for dining in the same restaurant."

Miss Arnold reddened in confusion. "Well, no, he couldn't, except—I do hate hinting scandal——"

"Never mind. You never know what may come in useful for this investigation. Did you mention to either of them that you'd seen them before, when you arrived at the camp? When did you come, by the way?"

"Last Saturday. That's just it, Mr. Strangeways. Miss Jones was standing on the terrace, and I just remarked that I'd seen her and Captain Wise at this Soho restaurant, and what a nice little place it was, ever so select, I mean, and the best French cooking, of course, my uncle being a real epicure as he always says—and she got quite snooty. Well, I mean, I wasn't trying to hint anything, I'm not a person to talk scandal, and besides it had never even entered my head: but Miss Jones gave me a look and said that Captain Wise was her employer and it was quite a common thing for employers and secretaries to have a meal together if there was sort of overtime to be done. Well, those weren't her exact words, of course, but it was what she meant. Warning me off the grass. Sort of humorously, she said it, but I thought there must be a bit more behind it than——"

"You thought *she* thought you were hinting at an affair between her and Captain Wise?"

"Yes, Mr. Strangeways. But I'm sure I never meant to do anything of the sort."

"I'm sure you didn't. No doubt, in a place like this, they have to be very careful there's no trace of scandal about the management, and that's what led her to misunderstand your meaning. Well, I'm glad we've cleared that up. Shall I ask your friend, Janice, to help you pack?"

This gave him an excuse to question Janice Mears at once; but the girl assured him that she had not talked to any one in the camp about Miss Arnold's blood-poisoning of two years ago, her friend being sensitive on the subject. This avenue of inquiry appeared, therefore, to peter out. Even if imagination could stretch so far as to suppose that Captain Wise and Miss Jones would adopt so roundabout a method as the Mad Hatter's tricks to silence Miss Arnold over their own liaison, it was now proved that they could not have known of her idiosyncrasy for wild parsley or her tendency to blood-poisoning.

Nigel wished he had not sent off the snapshot of the mysterious "Mr. Charles Black." Phyllis Arnold might have recognised in him the Mr. Leyman who was "connected with holiday camps," and had been talking to Captain Wise in the Soho restaurant. Or she might not, he reflected ruefully: the odds were a thousand to one against it. Still, any straw when you're drowning. Nigel scribbled a note to his uncle, asking whether the photo by any chance was that of a Mr. Leyman, connected with holiday camps. Captain Wise and Miss Jones had declared that they did not recognise the subject of the photo, but they might have had some private reason for that.

A firm believer in shock tactics, if sparingly employed, Nigel went up to the manager's office, smiled abstractedly upon him and Miss Jones, and said without preamble:

"This Mr. Leyman—is he a business rival of yours?"

The affect of his question was notable indeed. Captain Wise stiffened, opened his mouth, but no words emerged. Nigel fancied that the pair had exercised superhuman self-control in not glancing at each other: their eyes were too studiously fixed upon his own. At last, when the silence had become almost intolerable, Miss Jones said:

"We'd better tell him, Mortimer."

"Esmeralda, have you gone mad?" Captain Wise's voice was stormy, but it was Miss Jones who seemed to control the elements of the situation.

"Have you been hearing some scandal about Captain Wise and myself?" she asked coolly enough, her red lips turned down at the corners in half-humorous resignation.

"Yes." Nigel outlined his conversation with the saxophonist and Miss Arnold, stressing that the latter had had no intention to offend.

"Answering your first question, Mr. Leyman is behind Beale and other holiday camps, so he's certainly a business rival," the girl continued. "The reason your question struck us all of a heap for a moment is that—well, he's one of the men I told you about who tried to take advantage of the helpless orphan when my father died. As you've probably guessed, Mortimer and I are very fond of each other. Our friendship dates from a certain occasion when he arrived rather opportunely in a room where Mr. Leyman was pursuing his advantage."

"I see. Was Leyman vindictive about it? Would he, for instance, organise the funny business that's been going on here, just to get his own back on you?"

"Well, I don't really think——" began Captain Wise, who had recovered his balance.

"Of course you don't! No, Mr. Strangeways, you can put that out of your head. Leyman was quite affable when we ran into him in that restaurant. He's a bit light-fingered with the dames, but there's no real vice in him. He'd not bear malice. And he's certainly got quite enough on his hands in the ordinary way of business to keep him from organising a campaign to discredit us here. If he'd wanted to ruin Mortimer and myself, he's quite powerful enough to do it by more orthodox business methods—you know, a word in the ear of one of our own directors after a good dinner."

"I may take it, then, that he's still not the gentleman in the snapshot I showed you?"

"You may." Miss Jones's eyes twinkled. "Wouldn't poor Tubby Leyman's ears burn if he knew how hard Mr. Strangeways was trying to incriminate him!"

"Yes. Well now," said Captain Wise, the efficient organiser again, his intonation suggesting that further levity on such sacred subjects as Big Business Men was undesirable, "if there's nothing more at the moment, Strangeways——?"

Chapter XIV

"What do you think of the detective?" asked Sally.

"Very quiet, isn't he? Funny, the way he looks at you—as if he was working you out to three places of decimals, and then taking away the number he first thought of."

" 'Looking at *you'?* D'you mean looking at me, or just at people?"

"People, of course, silly. You're not the only pebble on the beach."

"I wonder. He suspects me of being the Mad Hatter, I'm sure. Sometimes I begin to suspect myself."

"Don't talk daft, Paul. Just because a silly old bit of wire is found under your chalet——"

"How did you know that?" Paul asked sharply.

"Why, you told me. Didn't you? It must have been daddy, then. Anyway, I'll tell Mr. Smart-Alec Strangeways you couldn't have put those animals in the people's beds. I know you couldn't."

"How d'you know that?"

Sally pointed to the bottom of the boat, where a dead mackerel lay.

"You wouldn't cut a piece off that fish for fresh bait, not even when you were sure it was dead. You hate touching dead things, don't you?" she said triumphantly.

"You're getting quite bright. Yes, I do. But it's no good," Paul added despondently: "that's not what a detective would call evidence."

"More fool him. I believe he *would* listen to me, anyhow. He's nice. I'm getting rather to like highbrows."

Paul, rowing mechanically, did not rise to this, one way or the other. He stared over Sally's bright hair at the distant headland.

"Who are you staring at? I suppose Miss Jones is on the cliff, watching you with a jealous eye."

"Don't be absurd. I've just got my eye fixed on a mark, so that I can row straight."

"You do take everything so seriously, don't you, my pet?"

"I don't take Miss Jones seriously."

Sally averted her head, and began twitching at the line she held over the stern. In a tone of marked cheerfulness, she cried:

"Row faster! The fish won't take the bait if you drag along like a wet Sunday."

Paul drove in the oars more vigorously, and the boat moved faster through the sea, which slapped its bows and chuckled beneath the keel. Westward, the cliffs were losing their identity in uniform shadow, while to the east they held the light of the declining sun in a tranquil embrace, cliff and sunlight melting together and transmuted into a relief of delicate, chased gold.

Looking over his right shoulder, Paul could see the beach, the landslide, the top of the Wonderland building above, the glass at one end of the "Captain's bridge" glowing like a fire-opal. There was something baleful about that glow. Fancifully, he compared it with the wicked flame from a plague-pit. Wonderland had been infected: the disease was breaking out everywhere: and the carrier——? Shuddering, he looked away. The sea, at least, was clean. Its clean salt lay on his lips and on Sally's golden arms. As long as they stayed out at sea, they were safe, free from the general defilement.

Obeying a perverse, obscure impulse, he drove in his left oar and headed the boat for the land.

"Oh, don't let's go in yet! It's lovely out here."

"It's getting on for dinner-time. There's hardly any one left on the beach."

"Who cares? We'll stay out all night and catch fish by moonlight. And bathe. I've always wanted to bathe naked in the moonlight. It's romantic."

"We'd die of cold."

"And next morning they'd find two poor, pale corpses, side by side on the sand. That'd be romantic, too."

"Not for the corpses."

"Stop! I've got a fish!"

Slowly she pulled in the line. The spinner shot up through the water towards them, like a sportive trick of light. There was nothing on the hook but a piece of seaweed. Paul began to row again.

"You might wait till I've caught one more fish. Just a little one."

"No. We're late."

"I don't believe you want to stay out all night with me."

"If I did, Strangeways would think we'd run away, Tantamount to a confession of guilt."

"Oh, damn Strangeways. *I* know you didn't do it, so what does it matter?"

"Supposing *I* don't know, though?"

"What it really is—you want to get away from me. This stupid girl, throwing herself at my head . . . Isn't it?"

"Well, you said it. I didn't."

Sally's face went white. She tried to coil up the line, but it seemed to have got into impossible tangles. A childish desolation came over her. She would have liked to weep salt tears all over the salty, dripping line.

In silence they pulled the boat on to the beach. Albert Morley, who had been watching them, helped to drag it above high-water mark. As soon as this was done Paul set off up the cliff path alone.

"Did you have successful fishing, Miss Sally?" said Albert awkwardly, perceiving that something was wrong. He couldn't have known, though, how appalling the phrase would sound to her. She took the mackerel out of the boat, said, "Just this," and stumbling down to the edge of the sea flung the fish far out.

"Oh, but that was quite a nice fish," he protested.

"And I'd like to throw myself after it!" she exclaimed.

"Well, Miss Sally," said Albert, after an awkward pause, "there are more fish in the sea than ever came out of it."

"Oh God!"—Sally was half laughing, half crying—"I'm not setting up a fishmonger's shop, am I? You sounded as if—I'm sorry, Albert, I didn't mean to break out at you. Let's go back."

"Yes. I mustn't be late to-night."

"Why?"

"I'm taking a little part in the show after dinner."

"Are you? That's splendid." Sally did not mean her intonation to be that of a grown-up commending a child's achievement. Nor, apparently, did Albert Morley take it as such. Stumbling among the boulders at the foot of the cliff-path, blushing a little and bobbing his head, but resolute of countenance, he said:

"Has that young man—I mean, is he responsible for—has he hurt you? Because if he has——"

"Oh, no. We're just both a bit upset. You see, he thinks he is suspected of being the Mad Hatter."

Mr. Morley nearly fell off the narrow cliff-path. "Oh but, bless my soul, surely that's impossible! He was most kind to me, most—from the first moment we met."

"I *know* it's impossible. But—well, the detective found a clue which rather points to him. And he's behaving so queerly himself. Why can't he tell me what's wrong? It makes me so miserable."

"Pride, Miss Sally. Pride. Depend upon it, that's what's behind it. It always is, with young people. I remember when I was your age——" Albert Morley sighed dramatically, tripped over a root and fell flat on his face. Fate, it seemed, would never allow him to be anything but the comic relief. No sooner was he on the point of establishing himself as a tragic, or at least a romantic figure—victim of some youthful, heart-breaking disaster, than Fate interposed a root before his feet. Even in his disasters, Fate decreed, he must remain a figure of fun.

"There you are," he remarked characteristically as Sally helped him up. "Pride goeth before a fall. There was I, just giving you some lofty advice, and down I came. Still, remember, my dear, pride doesn't pay any dividends."

"It's not me who's proud," she said desolately, recollecting too vividly how she had cast aside all pride in the boat, and how brutally Paul had wounded her as a result.

"Perhaps he thinks he oughtn't to say anything to you while he's suspected of these outrages," suggested Mr. Morley, an anxious half-smile on his chubby face. . . .

It was there again, three hours later, in the concert hall where the male visitors were giving a short vaudeville programme assisted by some members of the staff. Albert Morley was dressed for the occasion, too. He was dressed, to be exact, in knickerbockers, norfolk coat, eton collar and school cap: his chubby, rubicund cheeks had been turned into caricatures of themselves with grease-paint; and he was sitting upon Edward Wise's knee, in the character of a ventriloquist's doll.

The audience, easily enough pleased by any turn, were in paroxysms of laughter at this one. For Teddy was an excellent showman as well as a good ventriloquist, and the topical dialogue—behind which Nigel seemed to detect the quick wit of Esmeralda Jones—would have been enough to satisfy a more exacting audience. Yet Albert Morley was, in one sense at least, the clou of the performance. His absurd appearance, as though like the celebrated parent in *Vice Versa* he had indeed suddenly been transformed into his schoolboy self; the pert, adenoidal voice which Teddy Wise put into his mouth; but, above all, the comically anxious concentration with which he strove to make his lips follow the course of the words that Teddy gave him—this it was that brought the house down. Nigel realised what the woman had meant when she told him about the baiting of Albert Morley. Teddy was, undoubtedly, making fun *of* the little man as well as *through* him: and the audience were laughing, with the rather frightening, cumulative unkindness of a crowd, as much at Albert himself as at the part he played.

"Now don't you be cheeky, or I'll tell the Mad Hatter of you," said Teddy.

"Ow, teacher, I'll be good!" piped Albert, bouncing animatedly on

Teddy's knee. "Tell you a riddle, mister. What's the difference between you and the Mad Hatter?"

"What's the difference between me and the Mad Hatter? Quite a lot, I hope. Let's see now, let's see——"

"Give it up, cock? I'll tell yer. He's nuts and you're to be Queen of the May, you handsome thing!"

Teddy turned the puppet Albert across his knee, and began to spank him soundly as the curtain fell.

Nigel, going out to smoke a cigarette, was presently joined by Mr. Thistlethwaite. An expression of strong intellectual excitement was upon the tailor's face, but he launched into speech with all the unhurried dignity of a liner gliding down a slipway.

"On a beautiful night like this, sir," he opened, "it seems almost a desecration to introduce the sordid topic of criminality."

"It does indeed."

Mr. Thistlethwaite inclined his head to Nigel, gave the night a look of dignified apology, and continued.

"We are in deep waters, I fancy, sir. Very deep waters. I have been giving some attention to this matter of the hermit, Old Ishmael, and my reasoning has forced me to a certain conclusion."

Mr. Thistlethwaite lowered his voice on the last phrase, for Paul Perry was approaching.

"Three heads might be better than two," suggested Nigel.

"As you will, sir. Mr. Perry, I was just about to tell Mr. Strangeways of my conclusions concerning the recluse."

"Oh yes?" Paul's voice concealed curiosity beneath a sceptical negligence.

"Briefly stated, they are this—the recluse," hissed Mr. Thistlethwaite, "is a spy!"

"Did he tell you that?" asked Paul irreverently.

"Please, Mr. Perry, please."

"Pray continue. This is really very interesting." Nigel's voice was perfectly serious.

"Let us take a turn in the direction of the bowling-green. Perambulation, sir, if I may so put it, is the best aperitif for thought. Our young friend's scepticism, though natural, is ill judged: for he himself held in his own hands the first link of the evidence."

"You refer, no doubt, to the aerial photographs?"

"Ah, Mr. Strangeways, I see there is no anticipating you."

"But a chap isn't a spy just because he has aerial photographs in his possession," Paul protested. "Any one can get hold of them."

"Justly observed. But my daughter, Sally, when I questioned her, vaguely recollected that at least one of these photographs depicted a dockyard. She is by no means sure of this. Taken in conjunction, however, with the fact that this self-styled, or shall I say cidevant?—hermit is in the habit of spending two days of the week in the naval port of Applestock, and visiting a public house much frequented by naval ratings, the point has its significance."

"Very good, Mr. Thistlethwaite," Nigel commended. "Had you not taken up another profession, you might by now be an ornament of Scotland Yard."

Mr. Thistlethwaite was vastly gratified. "I own myself a mere amateur," he deprecated. "But not perhaps altogether lacking in flair. The sartorial vocation demands a certain gift for sizing up a subject, for determining the material that will best set off his physical lineaments, for suiting the cloth to the character. Here a touch of bravura is indicated: there, a more demure effect. In a word, we cut the cloth to suit not only the purse but the personality. A similar gift, may I venture to suggest?—is required for the detection of crime. You, sir, having studied your crime from every angle, having measured it up in each particular, then proceed to—however, I digress. Let us return to Old Ishmael. What would be his motive for so dastardly a betrayal of his own country? I will answer you in one word. Vengeance."

Mr. Thistlethwaite glared horribly upon his audience, blew his nose, and continued.

"Never a good citizen—for as a recluse he had long disregarded all social obligations, he conceived a positive hatred for society, and particularly for the government of his country, when he was evicted from his shack upon these cliffs. At first this hatred expresses itself in childish acts of reprisal against the holiday camp: he strews nails on the road, and so forth. But presently a more sinister opportunity is revealed to him. A certain Mr. Charles Black comes to stay with the farmer, Swetenham: he goes out on the cliffs with field-glasses: he objects to being photographed. Such conduct is not that of an honest man. Mr. Black hears about Old Ishmael, and seeks acquaintance with him. They are seen together in Applestock. Mr. Black is unquestionably an enemy agent. But he dare not himself undertake the work of espionage in Applestock. Instead, playing upon the recluse's grievance, he suborns him to the flagitious task. Here is an instrument ready to his hand. Old Ishmael is an established figure in the town: we ourselves noticed how he sat in the Mariner's Compass, and nobody paid the least attention to him. He is even presumed to be deaf. One of the chief tasks of a spy is to collect information, which he sends in to a central bureau that pieces it together with fragments sent in from a whole network of spies. Our gallant sailors, so rightly nominated 'the Silent Service,' are the last men to accuse of wilful indiscretion. But who could blame them if from time to time they talked a little too freely in the presence of Old Ishmael—the recluse, the harmless, deaf eccentric? Why, he scarcely existed for them as an individual at all. I say, one would impute no deliberate misdemeanor to so fine a body of men as our tars. But even in the healthiest body there may be one or two evil——"

"The little matter of the betting-slip," murmured Nigel.

"Just so. Why, confound it, Mr. Strangeways, I believe you were on to the whole thing long ago." The tailor sounded considerably dashed, and Nigel hastened to reassure him.

"It is very encouraging to find that your judgment supports my own suspicions. As you say, if that chap had wanted to pass on some information to Old Ishmael, he couldn't have chosen a less suspicious way than that of jotting down a tip for a greyhound race on a piece of paper which contained the information, and passing it over in full view of every one. Still, we mustn't build too much on it. It's a bit flimsy as a clue. If only we could have another look at those aerial photographs! But he'd probably have got rid of them by now. You didn't notice, I suppose, whether any of them depicted a harbour, Perry?"

"No. I—we were too excited at finding the one of the holiday camp."

"Nobody's allowed to fly over those docks; so, if he had photographs of them, they must have been passed on to him by someone in the Air Arm. However, that'll be taken in hand by other people."

They began walking back towards the concert hall. On the way, Paul Perry remarked:

"Talking of clues, Mr. Thistlethwaite, how did you know that a certain piece of wire was found underneath my chalet last night? I didn't realise you were in Strangeways' confidence to that extent."

"My dear sir, you forget that your chalet is only a matter of twenty yards or so from mine. I could hear almost every word of the conversation that occurred."

"Oh hell! Every one seems to be a detective in this damned place!" Paul exclaimed, and flung himself off.

"Tck, tck, tck. The young gentleman is very much on edge, isn't he?"

"Yes," said Nigel thoughtfully. "Yes, he is . . . Tell me, now: how long have you known Mr. Morley?"

They had met him first on their visit to Wonderland last year, Mr. Thistlethwaite said. He had attached himself to them rather as a lost dog attaches itself to the first human being who gives it a kind word, Nigel imagined. Not that he was an unhappy man. He just had that air of being lost, eager for some human attachment; and no doubt it was this which found a response in Sally's warm heart. He worked at a shipping office, and lived alone in rooms, said Mr. Thistlethwaite. He was the kind, thought Nigel, whom a landlady would either mother or fleece abominably; it depended on the landlady.

"Always taking up some new hobby, and then dropping it, I gather," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "One time it was chemistry. Then he started to learn Esperanto. Now he's all for astronomy—only the other day he said he wished he could afford a telescope."

"It's typical of the romantic, that, isn't it? Always starting something new, and giving it up because they don't become perfect at it in a few days. The ineffectual day-dreamer."

"Ineffectual, sir? I wonder. Still waters run deep."

"Some still waters don't run at all." If Mr. Thistlethwaite was hinting anything, Nigel did not appear to realise it.

On their left, they could see the fairy lights strung like Woolworth jewellery above a crescent of chalets. The trees seemed as if cut out of black cardboard. Over there, a member of the staff, conspicuous in his white trousers, was strolling around, flashing an electric torch; it was about this time last night that the Mad Hatter had acted; but surely he would not repeat himself here, now the place was so carefully patrolled. From the concert hall they could hear the strains of a sea-shanty. The interval was over. Nigel left Mr. Thistlethwaite at the door of the big building, and went off by himself to do the rounds of the camp. Three times, at different points, he was challenged: the watchers were certainly on the *qui vive* to-night. If nothing happened before midnight, Nigel reflected, this would have been the Mad Hatter's first blank day. Was it just that he dared do nothing further, or had his object now been achieved?

Nigel went to his own chalet, turned on the light, and settled down to read Paul Perry's gossip note-book. There was a good deal more of it than Nigel had expected. Perry had a good verbal memory and was painstaking to a degree: he must have put down extracts from all the conversations he had heard; certain of these were underlined neatly in red ink—extracts, Nigel presumed, which revealed the viewpoints, characteristics, habits, special reactions of camp residents. It was not these, however, which engaged Nigel's attention so much as one or two others, scattered about in the book, apparently irrelevant, but underlining and bringing into high relief Nigel's own tentative theory. He believed he now knew the identity and motive of the Mad Hatter. Yet it would still be as difficult as ever to present valid proofs. And there was still a great deal to be done.

Nigel went out again, in search of Teddy Wise. The vaudeville performance had been over for nearly an hour, and Teddy was recuperating at the bar.

"Cheerio, Sherlock, what's yours?" he said.

Nigel said a whisky and soda, and Teddy threw a ten-shilling note down on the bar. He was evidently a bit more even than his usual expansive self. An empty stomach, Nigel reflected, is not the only empty thing you can get drunk on: the stage artist, keyed up, filled with nervous tension before he goes on, is emptied by his performance and becomes eminently vulnerable to alcohol. Teddy, for all his hearty, obtuse exterior, was a genuine artist in his way. Neurotic too, suspected Nigel, who had often contemplated writing a monograph on the neurotic tendencies of the athlete.

"You don't get your drinks free, then?" he said.

"No fear, old boy. Luckily for my morale."

"Your brother does, though, he told me."

"Oh, you've seen his little private bar? That's technically for entertainment purposes only. Well, there's nothing to stop him entertaining himself now and then. Considering the mingy salary he gets, I'm surprised he doesn't take more advantage of his little extras."

Teddy Wise was sober enough to talk in lowered tones, for the bar was being well patronised to-night.

"What do they pay him? £1000 a year? That sort of thing?"

"Not by a longish chalk. Look here, can't go on all night talking in stage whispers—bad for the uvula. Let's go and have a yarn in my luxury apartment."

This was exactly what Nigel wanted. Presently they were sitting over a bottle of whisky in Teddy's room, which was at the top of the Wonderland building—a floor above the manager's office. Luxury apartment was just the word for it. With its built-in cupboards and electric fire, its moss-thick carpet, chromium writing-table and strip lights, it was all luxury and no comfort. Teddy Wise, who looked so very far from at home in it, had done nothing to make it look more homely. Noticing Nigel's politely dismayed expression as he surveyed the room, Teddy Wise said:

"Pretty awful, isn't it? Any visitors who trot along to see me are meant to be impressed by the room and tell every one how well the company looks after its employees."

But that scarcely explains its anonymous appearance, thought Nigel:

not even a photograph on the mantelpiece or a rugger cap hung up on a picture. He said:

"I've never been in one of these camps before. It's extraordinarily interesting. Your brother must be a first-rate organiser. I suppose he's had a good deal of experience."

"Well, he was secretary of a golf club before he came in here. That, and the army, were all the organising he'd done. But Mortie always falls on his feet."

Nigel detected some bitterness beneath the young man's tone. Jealousy, was it—of a brother who had always taken the limelight? Of set purpose, he continued to praise Mortimer Wise. Presently Teddy, who had been making further inroads upon the whisky, interrupted.

"Yes, that's what every one says. I don't mind telling you, though, old man, he'd be nowhere without Esmeralda. She's the live wire, believe you me."

"Surprising to find a girl with her looks and talents in a job like this. You'd have thought she'd have done better for herself."

"How d'you mean, 'done better'?"

"Well, made a rich marriage, for instance."

There was a rather tortured look on Teddy's handsome face. He said:

"Rich marriage? Yes, she'd like her bit of luxury. She was born to it. But she likes my esteemed brother even better."

There was no question now of the bitterness in his voice. So Teddy's bitten, too, thought Nigel.

"He's a good deal older than you, isn't he?"

"What are you getting at?" Teddy said.

"I mean, he's rather old for her, isn't he?" Nigel replied obliquely.

"You know, old boy, I'm sure you're the sleuth of the century and all that: but you can't fool Teddy Wise. Have a spot more? Say when. I can see you're leading up to the big moment. Why doesn't Esmeralda prefer the eligible young Teddy to the doddering old Mortie—that's the ruddy rub, isn't it?"

"Well——"

"Don't apologise, my dear fellow. No offence taken. You've got your job to do. The answer is, I don't know. But she does. And where do we go from there? Burning with jealousy and frustrated passion, the younger brother sets out to ruin the elder. Damn you, he hissed, I'll get even with you yet. And so the Mad Hatter was born. Bring out your handcuffs."

Nigel laughed. "That's a very spectacular confession. You ought to be on the stage. By the way, I enjoyed your turn to-night. I hope Albert Morley did, too."

"Oh, he doesn't mind. He's used to it. Cheery little chap—you can't keep him down."

"Does dramatic talent run in your family?"

"Aha! Sherlock on the job again. I suppose it does. Mortie used to be pretty hot on impersonations. I say—you're very inquisitive about the old boy, aren't you? If you've got the idea that he's the Mad Hatter, you'll have to think again. Oh, I know the gag—it was just a routine question. But seriously, if this camp goes down it'll be the finish of Mortie. You can count him out."

Nigel changed the subject to Old Ishmael. He learnt that about this time last year the recluse had disappeared from his usual haunts for several weeks.

"I used to clock in once a week at the Mariner's Compass," Teddy said, "and they told me he'd not been showing up there."

After a little more conversation, Nigel said good-night and went off to his chalet. It was a moonless, velvety summer night, surprisingly dark now that the fairy lights had been extinguished. Looking at his wrist-watch as he took off his coat, he saw that it was nearly one o'clock. He put the watch down on the dressing-table. The next instant he was startled out of his skin by a loud explosion . . .

Sally Thistlethwaite, who had not yet been able to go to sleep, started out of bed. For a moment she thought the explosion had taken place in the chalet, so violently did it break into her drowsy senses. She ran outside, her father close behind her. Every one seemed to be tumbling out of the chalets nearby: the Mad Hatter's outrages had keyed up people's nerves, so that they hardly knew what to expect next. There was a confused hubbub, which was suddenly drowned by a whoosh, a noise like an escape of steam at high pressure. It was all over in a second, though the second was long enough for every one to feel the icy lash of panic. There was the whoosh, and from the trees at the near end of the crescent something that whished and flared came straight at the group between the chalets. It seemed to be coming straight at them, but before any one had time to duck it had passed just over their heads and was gone flaring into the night.

A hand seized Sally's wrist and dragged her into cover. Women screamed again. They were all trying to get behind the chalets.

"A rocket!" exclaimed Paul, his hand still round Sally's wrist. "The bloody swine! Did you hear that first bang? It was right underneath my chalet. I——"

"Get indoors, turn on the lights and open the curtains!" shouted Nigel, who had arrived on the scene. "Where did that rocket come from?"

"Those trees," said Paul, emerging from cover. "I'll go and find out——"

"No, stay where you are, both of you," Nigel ordered.

The crescent was blazing with lights as he ran towards the trees. The Mad Hatter would surely not attempt any more fireworks. Amongst the trees, there was nothing but shadows—shadows, and on the edge of the trees, stuck into the grass, a small fork of wood on which the forepart of the rocket stick must have rested. It had evidently been aimed deliberately so as to pass the left-hand edge of the nearest hut, shoot just over the heads of those who would be brought out into the crescent by the sound of the first explosion, and clear the top of the chalets beyond them on the right.

By the time the staff-attendant arrived, Nigel had pocketed the wooden fork. The attendant had been at the far end of the crescent and seen nothing but the rocket. Indeed the flare had been so blindingly close that no one could have seen anything for a few moments after. But the Mad Hatter had not relied upon this to aid his escape. For Nigel, carefully scrutinising the grass around the spot, found there the remains of a burned-out fuse.

He left the staff-attendant to guard the place, and returned to the crescent.

"Something went off underneath my chalet," Paul told him. "I think it must have been one of those firework bombs. They make the hell of a noise, I thought it was the I.R.A. at first."

Nigel flashed his torch under the chalet. Yes, a charred cardboard container. This, too, he could see, had been set off by a fuse.

"*Now* what's been happening?" came the exasperated voice of Captain Wise. His thin hair was rumpled, he wore a silk dressing-gown, and his artificial teeth had not been replaced for the occasion. Nigel began to tell him; but it was difficult in the group of residents that had come milling around them. He took the manager into Paul's chalet and firmly closed the door. Sitting on the bed, Nigel gave a brief account.

"Presumably he lit the fuse of the firework bomb first, then stuck the rocket in position and lit its fuse, and he could have had time to go home and solve the *Times* crossword if he'd wanted—the fuses were long enough."

"It lets me out, anyway." Paul Perry's voice was still a little shaky. Neither Nigel nor Captain Wise made any comment. "Well, damn it, I wouldn't have set off a bomb under my own chalet, would I?"

"Besides, you must have heard something when the chap put it there," suggested Captain Wise, kindly.

Shock, doubt, anguish, passed over Paul's face—clear enough for any one to read. Half to himself, he muttered:

"That's funny. I don't remember hearing anything. Oh God! Surely I'd never do a thing like that! Not that rocket. Sally was there." Suddenly he turned upon them both. "Get out! Get out of here! I'm sick of being badgered!"

"Pull yourself together, my dear chap," said Captain Wise. "No one's accusing you of anything. The chap may have done it so quietly you didn't hear."

He and Nigel left the chalet. As they were walking away, Captain Wise said:

"Nothing in that, is there? I mean, as he said, he wouldn't have put the bomb under his own chalet—not if he was the practical joker."

"Not *unless* he was the practical joker, you mean. It'd be the obvious way of clearing himself of suspicion, wouldn't it—to stage one of the jokes on himself?"

"Oh, that's a bit too subtle for me," said the manager, laughing.

Chapter XV

The next day, though for the great mass of the Wonderland residents it provided nothing more dramatic than the weekly sports gymkhana, was unbelievably melodramatic for two of them. Not only melodramatic, one might say, but decisive; for they would never be quite the same again. To a superficial observer their actions, in relation to the characters who performed them, might have seemed a running contrary to form—almost a flat contradiction of all we know about the characters. Luckily Nigel Strangeways was not a superficial observer, and was able to see how these actions, apparently so impromptu and paradoxical, proceeded logically from deep-lying sources. Had he not perceived this, the Mad Hatter case would have become intolerably complicated, and perhaps defied all solution. It was, in essence, as he had vaguely suspected all along, a simple enough case, its difficulties being on the whole accidental to the main plot.

This morning, as yesterday, the *Daily Post* lived up to its reputation for making the best of the newspaper silly season. FURTHER OUTRAGES AT WONDERLAND, it announced to its enraptured readers. DEAD RABBIT IN 'TEC'S BED. And in considerably smaller type, HOLIDAY BELLE POISONED? Whatever consolation Phyllis Arnold may have derived from this headline, Captain Wise plainly believed that the whole thing was a final, knock-out blow for Wonderland.

"Where's the leakage, though?" he kept on plaintively asking Nigel. "How did they find out this time?"

"Presumably the Mad Hatter rings them up with a daily bulletin."

"We ought to have had the telephone boxes watched," said the manager irritably, by "we" clearly meaning "you."

"It'd have been no use. We couldn't possibly ring up the exchange every time one of your visitors makes a call, and ask them what he's been talking about. We haven't got police powers."

"Arbuthnot—that's our managing director—is coming down this morning. I'd like to have something concrete to show him."

"Concrete? How d'you mean?"

Really, thought Captain Wise, this alleged detective is being remarkably obtuse and unhelpful to-day.

"Something about the Mad Hatter, of course."

"You'd like me to produce the Mad Hatter at the conference?"

"Well, naturally," replied the manager, looking a bit startled. "But I quite realise you've had very little time. We can't expect results so soon, and——"

"Oh, I'll bring him out of the bag, if you like."

"You know who he is? Since when?" Captain Wise was in a state of keen excitement.

"I've *known* for some time. I can't prove it yet, though."

"It wouldn't be much good, then. Arbuthnot's a man who'll want hard facts."

"He's that sort of man, is he? And if he doesn't get them, I suppose I'm fired?"

"No. Not necessarily. It was on my responsibility that you were called in, and I shall be footing the bill myself." Captain Wise gave a short, apologetic laugh. "No. But the fact is that this publicity, in my judgment, has done for the Wonderland camps, so it doesn't much matter now whether we discover the culprit or not. To put it bluntly, I can't afford to pay you much longer for doing work that has ceased to be of more than academic importance."

"I see that. Though I shouldn't say that the protection of your guests is an entirely academic matter. After all, the chap may start shooting off something more lethal than rockets at them soon——"

"There'll be damned few guests to shoot at next week." Captain Wise indicated a pile of letters on his desk. "That's just one post. People cancelling their bookings. Yes, they're preferring to sacrifice their deposits rather than come to this plague spot."

"As bad as that? Yes, quick results do seem to be called for. I must jump to it." At the door Nigel turned and said, "By the way, can you vouch absolutely for Miss Jones?"

"Vouch——? What an extraordinary suggestion! You don't seriously——"

"Her father was ruined and driven to suicide by financial competitors. If any of those men were behind Wonderland, it would supply the motive."

"But the idea is fantastic. She's entirely trustworthy, devoted to this place—why, I don't mind admitting, she's done more than any one for it. You say you know who the culprit is; but if you've fastened on her, you've made a complete blunder."

Nigel retired. In spite of Captain Wise's protestations, Nigel believed he had seen a faint glimmer of doubt, of hesitation in his eyes. Going to one of the telephone boxes downstairs, he rang up Sir John Strangeways at New Scotland Yard. Sir John's information was largely negative. He had had discreet inquiries made into the Wonderland company, and could assure Nigel that none of the financiers who had ruined Lysaght Jones were behind it. He had no information to the discredit of Teddy Wise, beyond a certain episode relating to a policeman's helmet knocked off after a Varsity match. Mortimer Wise, declared Sir John, had run very quickly through a large legacy received a few years ago: this, Nigel imagined, was the period when he had become acquainted with Miss Jones: after that, Mortimer had descended to the secretaryship of a golf club; his copy-book appeared to be unblotted.

"And what about that snapshot I sent you?"

"No luck yet. Give me time, boy. I've only had a few hours."

"Try——" Nigel mentioned the name of a secret department which invigilates over the activities of foreign agents. "I fancy they may have seen that phiz before."

He rang off, leaving his uncle fuming at the other end of the wire. His next move was to go in search of Sally Thistlethwaite. He found her practising with Mr. Morley for the three-legged race that would take place in the afternoon. Detaching the girl from her partner, he took her off to a quiet seat near the edge of the cliffs. Behind them, to their left, was the white, functional Wonderland building, the windows behind the "Captain's bridge" open to the mild southerly airs. From the fun-fair, which was behind them on their right, came the cries of children at play. Nobody appeared to be using the miniature rifle range; but from somewhere inland, where a territorial camp was situated, there could be heard the spasmodic rattle of machine-gun practice. These sounds punctuated the rhythmically beating ground-bass made by the sea as it played upon the shingle far below. Nigel began to question Sally about her own experiences at the camp. She was evidently on the defensive against him when the names of Paul Perry or Albert Morley were mentioned, though she was frank enough about every one else: this first became apparent when he talked about the duckings; she insisted that neither of them had been near her when she was pulled under water, but her insistence did not ring true to his ear.

Nigel, however, had a way with unwilling witnesses, and before long she was confiding in him her fears for Paul Perry.

"I'm certain he didn't do these things, but he makes it so difficult for me. He seems to be avoiding me. I wanted him to be my partner in the sports, and he just said he was going for a long walk to-day. It's funny," she added with pleasant ingenuousness, "because I'm sure he's attracted to me."

She then told him how Paul had refused to handle the fish she caught. "That proves it, doesn't it?" she said. "If he hated touching the fish, he'd never have carried those beastly stinking animals about."

"No. Unless he didn't know he was doing it. Has he talked to you about split personality at all?"

"We were talking about it—when was it?—on Sunday, I think—by the tennis-courts. But——"

"I think one reason why he's behaving oddly, avoiding you and so on, is that he's afraid that's what's wrong with him."

"Do *you* think it's true?" Sally asked directly.

"I can't say absolutely for certain yet."

"If it was, and he is the Mad Hatter, they couldn't do anything to him, could they?" Her eyes were veiled now by her dark lashes.

"They wouldn't put him in prison, no."

Sally opened her eyes wide at him: the effect was dazzling, like sunshine after rain. She said, blinding at the words:

"Would a person like that have dotty children, if they had children?"

"Probably not. But we're looking a bit too far ahead, my dear, aren't we? Let's get back to the case."

Sally answered his questions more freely now. Little by little, he drew from her all she had seen and heard during the last five days. While they talked, one of the staff came and herded the children away from the funfair: the children's sports started at eleven-thirty and were to be over by lunch-time. Shortly after eleven-thirty a messenger arrived asking for Nigel's attendance in the manager's office. The great Mr. Arbuthnot was come, in clouds of wrath, to deliver judgment.

Mr. Arbuthnot had small, shrewd, choleric eyes, a rather ferocious set of the mouth, and a neck that overlapped his collar at the back. He looked what he was, the successful business man: he was behaving now like a spoilt child whose world has suddenly turned him over and given him a spanking.

"——the whole thing's been outrageously mismanaged from the start," he was saying as Nigel entered. "The company holds you responsible, Wise, and—who the devil's this?"

"Mr. Strangeways. This is our managing director, Mr. Arbuthnot."

Mr. Arbuthnot gave Nigel a curt nod and one of those cold, searching gazes with which his kind like to feel they are at once summing up the character of the recipient and putting him in his place. Sitting behind his desk, Captain Wise fiddled sheepishly with papers: Teddy Wise, standing by the far wall, had the glazed look of a punch-drunk pugilist—he had evidently had a gruelling at the hands of Mr. Arbuthnot. Only Esmeralda

Jones seemed unconcerned: her cool, demure efficiency was almost a parody of itself: Nigel could have sworn that her left eyelid drooped at him behind the horn-rimmed glasses, as the managing director began stamping up and down the room again.

"The police should have been called in at once, Wise, since you were incapable of controlling the situation yourself. There's no use having amateurs fiddling about with this kind of thing."

"As I told you, Mr. Arbuthnot, the police would have meant publicity and great inconvenience for our visitors," Captain Wise repeated wearily.

"Damn it, man, you've had the publicity and the inconvenience anyway. *And* made a fool of the company into the bargain."

"If I'm not wanted," Nigel interposed politely, "I'll go. I've got plenty to do."

Mr. Arbuthnot halted abruptly and stared at Nigel as if he hadn't noticed him till this moment.

"You'll go when I tell you, young man. You're in the company's employment now, and don't you forget it."

"On the contrary, I understood I was being paid by Captain Wise."

"Well, well, don't quibble. You're supposed to be here in the company's interests, though what you've done to justify——"

"I'm here to discover the identity of a practical joker, Mr. Arbuthnot, and not to whitewash the Wonderland company."

The director's bull-like neck went purple and seemed to swell.

"Whitewash? Who said anything about whitewash?" he exclaimed.

"I just wanted to make my position quite clear," Nigel answered mildly.

"Oh, you did, did you? Well, perhaps you'll now go on to make it quite clear what you've done to justify that position. And I want facts, see?—no fancy theorising."

That suited Nigel, too, who felt no strong desire to place any theories before Mr. Arbuthnot in his present mood.

"Very well. Here are the facts up to date——"

"Wait a minute. It's damned hot in here. You—what's your name?—Miss Jones—can't you open a window or something?"

"The windows are all open, Mr. Arbuthnot," she replied sweetly. "Perhaps you would prefer to continue the conference on the balcony?"

Grumbling, the director assented. Chairs were brought outside, and Nigel gave a résumé of the outrages and his own investigations. When he had finished, Mr. Arbuthnot gave an impatient snort.

"Yes, yes," he exclaimed testily, "we know all that. What do you make of it? Have you got anywhere? That's what I'm interested in. You're paid to get results, aren't you?"

Shrugging his shoulders, Captain Wise stood up and moved over to the rail at the right-hand end of the balcony.

"The case is by no means a simple one," Nigel began. Before he had got very far, Mr. Arbuthnot interrupted:

"Poppycock! Don't start making a mountain out of a molehill—I'm not impressed. Any one with their wits about them ought to be able to put a finger on this chap at once. Some hooligan starts practical joking, and you all behave as though he was a master criminal. Good God, you're not acting in an Edgar Wallace——"

Mr. Arbuthnot's tirade was cut short, for the second time within a few minutes. Accustomed to being heard out in respectful silence, the director was stung to fury by this treatment. He glared at Captain Wise, who had interrupted him by clapping his hand to his ear. He shouted:

"What the devil——?"

But Nigel was already on his feet, peering incredulously at Captain Wise, who said:

"Something must have stung me. A hornet, I should think." He took his hand away from his ear. It was covered with blood. And blood was streaming from a neat notch, like the hole clipped by a bus-conductor's punch, that had been made high up on the edge of his ear.

"That's not a sting. You've been shot at."

"Rubbish," said Mr. Arbuthnot, his eyes popping, "People don't——"

"Shut up!" said Nigel over his shoulder: he was now leaning over the end of the balcony. "I thought I heard a shot, only you were bawling so loud. Yes, somebody shot at Wise from the miniature range down there. A .22 presumably. Teddy, come over here and keep your eye on the range. Miss Jones, get some cotton wool and plug that wound: then fetch the doctor." He raced through the office and down the stairs.

"An inch or two to the right, and that bullet'd have gone into the back of my head," Captain Wise was saying dazedly.

"There's your first introduction to the Mad Hatter, Mr. Arbuthnot," said Miss Jones.

But Mr. Arbuthnot had retired precipitately into the office, and was steadying himself with the contents of a pocket flask.

Watching from the balcony, Teddy Wise saw Nigel run towards the fun-fair and enter the miniature range. Nobody had emerged from it in the interval, and there was clearly nobody hiding there now. So much Teddy could see: what he could not see was the expression of bewilderment on Nigel's face. The shot which had clipped Captain Wise's ear and so intimidated Mr. Arbuthnot, had neatly upset all his own calculations, too. Calling to Teddy to stay where he was, he went round to the back of the miniature range and hurried towards a clump of trees some hundred yards beyond that was the only cover for any one who might have fled in this direction. As he did so, a figure walked out towards him from the trees, and resolved itself into the form of Albert Morley.

"Hallo," he said; "anything up? I heard shouting."

"Captain Wise has been shot. Did you see any one come this way?"

"Shot?" Albert Morley looked as if he was going to be sick. "But it's—he's not dead?"

"No. He escaped that by a couple of inches."

"Oh, thank God! thank God! What a terrible thing to happen!"

"You didn't see any one?"

"No. I was just going for a little walk, and I heard people shouting, and——"

"Did you hear the shot?"

"Well, I suppose I must have. But one often hears shots from the range. You say Captain Wise was hit?"

"Yes. In the ear. You'd better come with me."

"Of course. If I can be of any help——"

Nigel examined the clump of trees, but no one was hiding there. They then went back to the fun-fair and searched the swing boats and everything else which could afford a hiding-place. Presently Nigel called Teddy Wise down from the balcony. Teddy was instructed to find the attendant who looked after the shooting-gallery, and to mobilise the whole staff for the purpose of finding out where each of the visitors had been at the time of the shooting.

When the attendant arrived, Nigel pointed out a rifle which was lying on the counter of the range.

"I want that taken away and put in a safe place. Wrap a handkerchief round the stock. There may be fingerprints. It has an empty cartridge-case in the breach, and must be the rifle that was used."

In a few minutes the man returned. Nigel learnt that he had been helping with the children's sports: it was quite usual to leave the shooting-gallery unattended—visitors put money in a slot if they wished to use the moving target, while shooting at the ordinary targets was free.

"D'you mean, any one can stroll in and pick up a rifle and blaze away? Isn't that a bit dangerous? One of the children here might walk off with a rifle."

"Oh, they're not allowed in without an adult." The man looked distinctly uncomfortable, and Nigel soon forced him into the admission that it was *not* usual to leave the gallery unattended: he had, in fact, forgotten to lock it up just now when he went over to the children's sports. This was shortly after eleven o'clock.

Nigel then enlisted his aid in making a thorough search of the gallery. The recent marksman must have departed in such a hurry that he might possibly have left some clue behind. If he had, they could not find it. What they did find, however, made the problem more baffling than ever. The attendant discovered that one of the rifles was missing.

"They were all in the racks this morning. I'll swear to that," he said.

"You mean, when you opened the place up, or when you left?"

The man looked still more uneasy. He admitted at last that he had not counted the rifles when he left the gallery at eleven o'clock: it was empty, then, and he had never thought of making an inspection. He held to it, though, that no rifle had been missing when he opened the gallery at ten o'clock.

If this was true, Nigel reasoned, it must either have been taken between eleven o'clock and the time when the shot was fired, eleven-fifty, during the period when the gallery was unattended and empty; or else it had been removed by one of the people who had been using the range between ten and eleven: though it was difficult to see how any one could have walked off with a rifle in full view of the attendant and other visitors. Then again, there was the question—why did the unknown marksman leave the rifle he had fired upon the counter and take away another one? It seemed absurd to suppose there could have been two individuals each of whom required the illicit use of a rifle on the same morning.

The attendant said that there were no fire-arms on the counter when he left the gallery to go to the sports: he had been in a hurry to get away, and had stacked the rifles in use that morning against the inside of the counter, instead of locking them up in the rack. Everything, Nigel reflected, had been made very easy for the criminal. He said:

"Could any one have known that you had left the gallery unlocked this morning? You didn't mention it to any one?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Strangeways. I didn't realise myself that I'd forgotten to lock up. I've only recently been put on to the gallery, and I'm afraid I've not got into the way of things yet."

"Who else has keys for it?"

"There's one in the office. And the games-organiser keeps one of his own. That's all."

Nigel finally asked the man if he knew the names of any of the visitors who had patronised the shooting-range that morning. It turned out that he knew several, of whom Paul Perry was one. Nigel then went up to the office, where he ascertained that one of the keys of the gallery was on its usual hook. The other key Teddy Wise produced from his pocket when Nigel approached him on the sports-ground. Unless someone was lying, this eliminated the possibility that the criminal had borrowed or stolen one of these keys in order to obtain a rifle, and had then found the gallery unlocked. Whoever had shot at Captain Wise had done it impromptu, tempted by the open gallery. This was what Nigel had presupposed; for, although the manager used the "Captain's bridge" quite frequently, the criminal could not have relied upon his being there—and at the only point of the balcony where he would be a target for a shot from the gallery—at that particular hour of the day.

But the problem of the two rifles still remained. Nigel's brain was hammering away at it as he strolled round the sports-ground, watching Teddy Wise and his assistants take a roll-call. Other members of the staff were going the round of the chalets, the other buildings, the beach and the grounds. By lunchtime Teddy was able to give him a report. Apart from one large party which had gone off on a charabanc trip, all the residents could account satisfactorily for their whereabouts at the time the shot was fired—all the residents, with the exception of Paul Perry, Albert Morley and Miss Gardiner. The two latter had been alone at eleven-fifty, they said: Miss Gardiner writing letters in her chalet, Mr. Morley walking away from the sports-ground to the spot where Nigel had met him. Albert volunteered in addition that Paul Perry had gone for a long walk: Paul was certainly not to be found in the camp, nor did he return for lunch.

After lunch, Nigel sought out Sally Thistlethwaite. Paul had not told her where he was going for his walk: in fact, she said, he had snubbed her when she suggested coming with him. No, she did not know at what time he had started out. Her father, however, reported having seen Perry walking down the drive at about half-past ten, away from the camp. Nigel took Mr. Thistlethwaite aside—he did not wish Sally to realise the object of his questions—and told him about the shot that had been fired at Captain Wise.

"At least our young friend cannot be held responsible for this culminating outrage," opined Mr. Thistlethwaite. "There is no question but that he was setting out for his walk when I saw him."

"What proof have you of that? He might have made a short detour and returned via that clump of trees above the shooting-gallery."

"One does not don a gaberdine, sir," retorted Mr. Thistlethwaite, slightly nettled, "in order to make short detours."

"A gaberdine?"

"He was wearing a loose, grey raincoat."

"Oh dear," said Nigel. "A raincoat for a long walk on a hot day like this? If he'd been carrying it—but wearing it: don't you see?—if it was the kind of coat that has slits beside the pockets, he could have been holding the rifle hidden beneath it, in a vertical position. I don't at all like the sound of this."

He liked it still less when he had interviewed the shooting-range attendant again. The man said he had observed that Perry was wearing a loose raincoat when he entered the gallery soon after ten o'clock: he had not noticed him leave. The evidence certainly suggested that it was Perry who had taken the missing rifle. But Nigel was still faced with the difficulty that the shooting of Captain Wise could not have been planned beforehand. The only possible theory which could at present account for the facts was that Perry had worked in collaboration with the actual marksman: he had taken the rifle for himself or his accomplice to use whenever occasion offered; but the accomplice, happening to be in the gallery when Captain Wise appeared on the balcony, had taken pot-luck with a rifle that was handy. And that theory is a nice tissue of coincidences and begged questions, thought Nigel disgustedly.

Until Paul Perry returned to the camp—always supposing that he did return, there was little that Nigel could do. He told the shooting-gallery attendant to remain at his post and watch out for any of the people who had used the range in the morning: the person who had taken the rifle might try to replace it unobserved. He then tested the other rifle for fingerprints; as he rather expected, it was so covered with them as to render it almost useless for purposes of identification.

Nigel's next move was somewhat in the nature of a forlorn hope. He rang up the *Applestock Gazette,* and asked for the senior reporter. Mr. Leeson admitted that the information about the new Wonderland outrages, which had appeared in the *Daily Post* this morning, was communicated to him over the phone yesterday. As far as he could tell, it had been the same voice speaking.

"Will you do me a favour?" asked Nigel. "If this Mad Hatter rings you up again with another story, I want you to hold him in play, and call me on another of your lines. Wonderland has two or three lines, so you'll be able to get through all right. When you've called me, keep the Mad Hatter talking as long as possible."

Mr. Leeson agreed to do this. Nigel then went to the office, where he found Captain Wise in bandages but a more cheerful frame of mind, and told him about the trap he had laid to catch the Mad Hatter.

"I'd rather you kept this quite confidential. Don't tell even your brother or Miss Jones. I shall be about the place. If a call comes through for me from the *Applestock Gazette,* I shall go at once to one of the telephone-boxes downstairs. Whoever is in the other will be the Mad Hatter. Of course, we can't bank much on this—the chap'll be very foolish if he doesn't suspect that some such trap might be laid for him."

"What's to stop him ringing up the *Gazette* from the nearest village or an A.A. box?"

"Nothing. But, if we hear he's ringing them up, and there's no one in the public boxes here, we'll know it's one of the people who's not in the camp grounds. Almost every one'll be at the gymkhana this afternoon, won't they?"

Almost every one was. Captain Wise, his bandaged head stimulating a wonderful variety of rumours amongst the residents, who had not yet been told about the shooting, sat in a deck-chair on the edge of the sports-ground, Miss Jones beside him. Teddy Wise was very much to the fore, organising each of the events, jollying the competitors along, and giving a humorous commentary through his megaphone. The sports were the most popular item in the week's entertainment, and every one seemed to be there. The charabanc party had returned. Only Paul Perry was still missing from the fold.

When the competitors for the three-legged race moved off to the start, Mr. Thistlethwaite drew Nigel away from the spectators. Indicating Mr. Morley, who was tying his leg to Sally's with a handkerchief, he said:

"You informed me, sir, that Mr. Morley was in the vicinity of the shooting-gallery this morning. Are you satisfied that the shot was intended for *Captain* Wise?"

"Hallo, hallo! What's your idea, Mr. Thistlethwaite?"

"Was Captain Wise facing towards the gallery when he was shot?"

"No, he had his back to it."

"The shape of his head is markedly similar to his brother's."

"I see. You suggest Albert Morley shot him by mistake for Teddy? Motive, presumably, being revenge for Teddy's having so often made a fool of him?"

"One can try even the most patient temper too far. The effort to repress a natural indignation may breed a hideous rancour," Mr. Thistlethwaite replied oracularly.

"You mean Albert Morley is the Mad Hatter?"

"I have suspected all along, sir, that these practical jokes were intended to culminate in a graver crime—a crime which might appear to be a practical joke of unintentionally fatal issue."

"But you told me Morley had an alibi for the period when the dead animals were being put about."

"I genuinely believed it, sir. In fact, I rallied Mr. Morley on the subject, telling him that he and I, at least, were now above suspicion. Observing him just now, however, as he tied himself and my daughter with that handkerchief, I was reminded by the process of thought-association —with which you are doubtless familiar—of something that had entirely slipped my memory. A handkerchief. It is the cause, my soul, it is the cause. To be brief, some six or seven minutes before the interval in the cabaret performance, I found myself requiring a handkerchief. Mrs. Thistlethwaite always keeps a spare one for me in her reticule. She was sitting apart from me, close to the side-door by the stage, as she had just returned from assisting Sally with her costume and make-up. I moved to the front and sat down beside her, not wishing to return to my own seat since Sally's number was just about to begin. When her turn was over, I went back and found Mr. Morley sitting where I had left him. But there are six or seven minutes unaccounted for."

Mr. Thistlethwaite made a consequential gesture, as if offering Nigel the six or seven minutes on a silver tray.

"That's interesting," said Nigel after a pause. "There are two difficulties about your theory, though. First, if the shooting was the intended climax of a prepared series of outrages, how do you account for its being so impromptu? He couldn't have known beforehand that the shooting-gallery would be open and empty at the very moment when his enemy appeared on the balcony."

"Indeed no, sir. He may have planned some other method of attack on Mr. Edward Wise. Or he may just have been awaiting the inspiration of a favourable moment. In either case, it is not unreasonable to suppose that, happening to be by the shooting-gallery, finding the time, the place, and the hated one all together, so to say, he would avail himself of the gift fortune had thrown into his lap. You mentioned a second objection, sir?"

"Yes. And if you can get round that, Mr. Thistlethwaite, you'll qualify as the boa-constrictor king. What do you say to the fact that Albert Morley is——"

"Excuse me, sir. May I have a word with you?"

It was the shooting-gallery attendant. Breathlessly he announced that Paul Perry had just passed by the entrance of the gallery, glanced in, and finding it empty except for the attendant, had passed on towards the cliffs. He was still wearing the grey raincoat, the man said, and looked very pale.

Nigel hurried away from the sports-ground towards the cliff. When they came in sight of it, there was no sign of Paul Perry.

"Don't think he's chucked himself over?" asked the attendant, not without a noticeable quickening of interest.

Nigel lay down on the cliff edge and peered over to his right, where the landslip lay, beckoning his companion to do the same.

"Can you see him? My eyes are not too good."

"Just a minute . . . There! He's behind that big rhododendron bush, half-way down the path."

"Hey! Perry! Stop a minute!" Nigel shouted.

His companion could see Perry start, make as if to run down the path, slip and fall, then after a few moments stand up again and begin climbing back towards them.

When they met him, Nigel was shocked by his appearance. His face was leaden grey, as if he were in the last stages of exhaustion: his eyes showed the meek despair of an animal which has been so long in the trap that it almost welcomes the hunter who brings it the *coup de grâce.* Yet there was something in the carriage of his head, the stiffness of the body beneath the raincoat, that seemed indefinably to contradict all this.

"Where've you been all day?" Nigel asked. "Do you know that Captain Wise has been shot—with a Winchester rifle from the shooting-gallery?"

Paul Perry's reaction to this was odd enough. "Nonsense," he said, huskily but with a certain authority. "Not Captain Wise." Then his eyes seemed to realise the point of Nigel's questions, to turn gradually from incredulity back to despair again, and from despair to the glazed look of insentience; and, muttering, "Oh, this is too much," he swayed forward and pitched into Nigel's arms.

"Go and look further down the path. Near where you first saw him. The rifle may be there somewhere," Nigel commanded.

In a couple of minutes the attendant returned. "Here it is, sir! Found it pushed in underneath the rhododendron bush—he hadn't time to hide it properly—must've been going down to chuck it in the sea. It's the one, all right. Magazine emptied, too. Wonder what he used the other bullets for."

Silently Nigel beckoned the man close and pointed to the body, now limp, which had held itself together so stiffly under the raincoat.

"God's truth!" the attendant exclaimed. "Tried to do himself in."

Beneath the raincoat, Paul Perry's clothes were soaked in blood, all over his left shoulder, over his heart, and down his left side.

Chapter XVI

"Won't you at least tell us where you went for your walk?" Nigel was asking patiently four hours later. He sat on one side of Paul Perry's bed, Dr. Holford on the other: the doctor, who examined Perry's wound when they had carried him back to the camp, declared it was not dangerous; a bullet had passed through the upper part of the arm, and the patient had lost a good deal of blood, but he should soon recover. The doctor was present at this interview to ensure that his patient should not be too exhausted by it.

Paul Perry, though still white in the face, had clearly benefited by his short sleep, and of the two it was Nigel who looked the more exhausted. He repeated his question.

"Sorry. My lips are sealed, though," replied Paul with a trace of his old jauntiness.

"Very well. If you won't, you won't. I can only say that you make things look bad for yourself. You remove a rifle from the shooting-gallery, having previously taken care to inform two people at least that you were going for a long walk. An hour and a half later, Captain Wise is shot. At three o'clock, when you know that every one will be at the sports, you sneak back, intending to replace the rifle. You find the attendant alone in the gallery, so you go on down the cliffs, meaning to chuck the rifle into the sea instead. Don't you realise—it'll take a lot of explaining away."

"Explain away, then. You're the detective, not me."

"How did you come by that wound?"

"The rifle went off by accident and my shoulder happened to be in the way."

"That's not true. The wound was made by a weapon of larger calibre—a heavy revolver, probably."

For the first time Paul Perry's passive resistance showed signs of cracking; the glitter in his eyes was dulled, but he remained silent. Nigel tried another angle of attack.

"Do you still assert that the Mad Hatter and Old Ishmael are one and the same person?"

Perry's mouth began to twitch and jerk: he made a convulsive movement, as if to raise himself in the bed, and fainted.

"Now, what on earth——?" murmured Nigel.

"That will have to be all for the present," Dr. Holford said, bending over his patient. The next moment he was startled by a loud exclamation from Nigel—"Oh, what a fool I am! Kick me three times round the camp!"

Nigel was out of the chalet, running towards the telephone-booths in the main building. There, he rang up the Applestock police; but before he had got the number, he put down the receiver again, muttering, "No, it'll take all night to explain."

He pelted up the stairs and found Teddy Wise in his room, just about to go down to dinner.

"I want half a dozen men to come up at once to the hermit's wood. Can you manage?"

"What's this? Some new rudery taken place?"

"I'll explain as we go. You'll come, too?"

"O.K., boss."

"Have you a revolver?"

"Lummy, it's like that, is it? Yes, I've my brother's old gat tucked away somewhere." Teddy rummaged in a drawer, produced a heavy service revolver and loaded it. Five minutes later, followed by six members of the staff armed with heavy sticks, they were on their way up to the wood.

When they had arrived there, Nigel distributed the six men round the edge of the wood.

"Stay where you are, unless you hear me shout. If any one sees him come out of the wood, give a yell. Be careful how you tackle him: he's armed. If he gets away, follow him at a distance. I don't expect he'll try to break through, though."

"Why not?" asked Teddy, as he and Nigel cautiously entered the wood.

"Because Perry shot him. At least, he believes he shot him. That's why he refused to tell me where he'd been."

"But if Old Ishmael really is——"

"Quiet!" Nigel stopped and listened intently. In the windless, fading evening the wood was still as death. Richly lacquered by the last of the daylight, the leaves hung motionless. Shadows stretched and mutely pointed, as though each tree and bush were an accuser. A rabbit, scuttling suddenly out of a ride, startled them like an explosion.

"Now I know what the poor little pheasants feel like when a poacher's around," whispered Teddy. "We're a sitting shot, if the old boy's still capable of lifting a gun. Are you armed?"

"I have a pair of scissors," said Nigel absently.

"Ah! Cold steel. The fellow'll never stand up to that."

Cautiously, keeping several yards apart, they moved through the wood. Brambles reached out and fastened on their clothes: branches whipped their faces. It was slow going. Teddy felt an almost irresistible impulse to shout aloud and go bursting through the tangle of undergrowth—anything to break the silence, the suspense.

At last they reached the edge of the clearing where the hermit's shack stood. Its stove-pipe chimney cocked up drunkenly into the air: all the shadows of the wood seemed to have saturated its bulk: shadow welled from it like dark blood. Teddy covered the door with his revolver, while Nigel darted to the back and made his way round.

The shack was empty. But the bricks beneath the fireplace were scattered about, and the cavity below them was empty, too. Nigel knew now that his theory was correct. It only remained to find the recluse himself. He was convinced that Perry had shot the man, or at least believed he had shot him: but he couldn't yet risk bringing in the six watchers to help search the wood, for the recluse might only be wounded and still able to evade them on ground he knew so well.

Summoning Teddy to his side, he began the search again. Presently, on the westward edge of the clearing, they found the bracken trodden down. A zigzag, intermittent trail let them, after many halts and false casts, in a rough circle round to the eastward end of the wood again. Twice they picked up ejected revolver shells, and in another spot the smaller case of a .22 bullet. The trail they followed so painfully was crossed at times by another one, also freshly made.

"This all tells a pretty grim story, doesn't it?" said Nigel.

"It's just so much Red Indians to me. I haven't the foggiest notion——"

Teddy was silenced by a loud cra-awk from nearby. A crow, startled by their approach, had flown up with a shattering clap of wings. Or was it they who had startled the bird? Might it not have been some faint movement from the fallen scarecrow beyond that tree, lying on the very spot from which the bird had risen, its black arms outflung and crumpled like the wings of a shot crow?

"That's a funny place for a——"

"And scarecrows don't usually have grey beards. It's all right. You can put that gun away. He's dead."

They approached the body of the recluse. In the dead centre of the forehead there was a neat red hole, a little resembling the caste-mark of a

Hindu princess. In other respects the corpse was less neat: the crow had found its eyes.

Teddy turned away, feeling abominably sick. The nightmare, however, seemed to reach another climax when he heard Nigel say:

"This is where the scissors will come in useful."

"What are you doing?" asked Teddy, quite unable to turn round.

"Cutting off his beard."

Presently Teddy heard Nigel calling to him. "Come and look. Do you recognise the face?"

Queasily he approached. "Well, I suppose so. But I recognised it much more easily with the beard on."

"Who is it?"

"Why, Old Ishmael presumably. Who the devil else could it be?"

"Oh no it isn't—not the proto-Ishmael, anyway. Look again."

"Good God!" Teddy exclaimed after a long pause. "I remember now! That snapshot you showed us. It was hard to recognise at first without"—he gulped—"without the eyes."

"Yes. We have here the gentleman who called himself Charles Black. And here's his revolver. And somewhere about him, I fancy, we shall find some aerial photographs, some documents—whatever it was that he surprised Perry taking out from under those bricks. Yes, this looks like it. A waterproof folder. Well, they can wait."

"But, look here, where *is* Old Ishmael then? The real one?"

"Oh, I doubt if we'll ever find him. He's down among the dead men. Very deep down. Maybe in that bog. Hoy!" Nigel kept shouting at intervals to guide the six watchers towards them. When they had arrived, the body was carried to the shack. Two of them would stay on guard there till the police arrived.

On his return to the camp Nigel was told that a call had come through to him from London: he was to ring back Sir John Strangeways at once. He asked if there had been any other calls. No, they told him. Well, it was something that the Mad Hatter had not taken advantage of his absence to communicate with the *Applestock Gazette:* anyway, the *Gazette* and the *Daily Post* might soon have a story that would push the Mad Hatter right off the front page.

"Where the devil have you been, boy," exclaimed the usually imperturbable Sir John, when Nigel rang him up.

"Just out for a walk, uncle."

"Well, you've no business to go out for walks when—that snapshot you sent me, we've identified it at last. It's a German agent our secret service had been watching for years. He disappeared about eighteen months ago.

Our people couldn't find any trace of him, and it was assumed he must have slipped out of the country. Where did you get the snapshot? Have you seen the fellow lately?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I saw him in a wood just now. He was——"

"Where? Don't you realise this is serious, Nigel? We can't afford to let him slip again."

"You're quite sure the chap in the photo is this spy of yours?"

"Yes, yes, yes. Look here, you must——"

"I only asked because it'd look pretty silly if we'd killed the wrong man."

"Speak up, boy! You sound as if you were talking gibberish."

"I said, the spy had been killed. Shot. Right through the middle of the head, head, head."

"SHOT?" Sir John's voice nearly blistered the wire. "Who shot him? Did you?"

"No. A young man who's staying in the camp. He did it with a Winchester .22 rifle. All by his little self."

From the other end of the wire came the sounds of a strong man fighting down hysteria. At last Sir John said, pronouncing each word most distinctly:

"Will you please tell me what you are talking about."

Nigel told him . . . An hour later he was telling it, with a little editing, to the Thistlethwaites in their chalet. Mr. Thistlethwaite tapped judicially on his beautiful drill trousers: Mrs. Thistlethwaite knitted as placidly as if she were listening to a radio talk for housewives: but Sally, sprawled and fidgeting on the bed, was all lit up with excitement.

"Your theory about Old Ishmael and the mysterious 'Charles Black' was remarkably correct up to a certain point, Mr. Thistlethwaite," said Nigel. "Its weakness was the assumption that the hermit had consented to take on the job of collecting naval information in Applestock. Why should he be offered it? No one lives the life of a hermit nowadays unless he's a bit wrong in the head: and people must be very much right in the head if they are to make successful spies."

"How did you first come to identify this Charles Black with Old Ishmael, sir?"

"When I heard that Old Ishmael had not been seen for several weeks on end just this time last year."

"Oh yes, I remember, Teddy told me that," said Sally.

"It seemed odd that a person of such regular habits—you could set your calendar by him, the landlord of the Mariner's Compass told me—should have lapsed from them like that. And, when he reappeared, the landlord said, he began to turn up in Applestock more frequently than his former two visits a week. These facts fitted the theory that the spy, having found in the hermit an identity he could profitably assume, had struck up an acquaintance with him, learned the part—so to speak—from the living model, then killed the hermit (I wonder did he dispose of the body in that bog across which Sally confronted him?), and hidden—either in the wood or elsewhere—for several weeks till his beard grew and he was weathered to the complexion of the hermit. The snapshot showed him as an elderly man with grey hair. The hermit's beard was grizzled. So that would work out all right. Sally gave me a hint, too."

"Did I? I don't remember—why, I never thought he was any one but the real hermit."

"No. But you told me you felt there was 'something artificial' about him. It was a delicate intuition on your part. That croaky, unused sort of voice you mentioned, too. That deliberate way of speaking. It answered just as well to a man who wished to disguise his voice, to speak *like* Old Ishmael, as to the voice of a real recluse."

There was a pause, broken at last by Mr. Thistlethwaite saying, "What I don't understand is how our young friend came into it. You hadn't informed him of the real identity of the hermit."

"No. I wish I had. It would have saved him a few pretty grim hours. And yet—— Of course, I had no proof myself then."

"What do you mean, 'and yet,' " Sally said. She lay tense on the bed, chin cupped in hands, her grey eyes blazing at Nigel.

"Now don't you glare at me like that," he replied good-humouredly. "You sent him into that wood yourself."

"I sent him? I'd no idea where he was going."

"Nevertheless, you sent him. He'd shown up to you twice in rather a bad light. Once, when you and he met the hermit in the wood and his nerve cracked; and again over that little altercation with Teddy Wise outside my chalet. He believed that you thought him a coward. That's why he's been so moody and difficult lately—one reason, at any rate. He wanted to reinstate himself with you and prove to his own satisfaction that he was not a coward. It sounds wildly romantic and four-featherish for a person like Perry: but even the sternest anti-romantic will jump in at the deep end if he gets a hard enough push."

"We are all heroes at heart," elaborated Mr. Thistlethwaite. "But to few of us is given, in this modern world, the opportunity of translating our dream into reality. The humdrum city clerk——"

"Daddy, do be quiet. I want to hear about Paul."

"Well," said Nigel, "the opportunity came to him when he heard your father and myself talking about Old Ishmael. I happened to say that we had no proof the hermit was a spy unless we found, amongst those aerial photographs, pictures of the Applestock naval harbour. So he decided to go and see if they were still there, under the fireplace on the floor of the shack. He took a rifle—that being the only firearm he could get hold of—because he was still genuinely scared stiff of the hermit and suspected, only too rightly, that he might be a dangerous customer. He went up to the wood, broke into the shack and unearthed the waterproof folder. He had not time to open it—this is important—because he heard footsteps approaching. Once again, though it was for the last time, his nerve cracked. He could think of nothing but escape. He threw down the folder in a panic, hid the rifle under his coat again, walked out of the shack. The recluse was standing on the edge of the clearing, still and stiff as a scarecrow, watching him. Just watching him.

"That was really his worst moment, he told me. He was thoroughly frightened, and at the same time boiling with humiliation—to be scared of an old, ragged man with a beard. He couldn't think of anything to say except, 'I thought it was going to rain. I went in to shelter. I hope you don't mind.' Which, considering there was a cloudless blue sky above, didn't begin to sound sensible. The next moment the hermit was across the clearing and inside his shack—that ungainly, flapping, yet horribly effective sort of movement——"

"Don't!" cried Sally. "I saw it at once."

"Anyway, Paul thought this the moment to beat a retreat. He ran off into the bracken. A bullet thudded into a tree beside his head. The spy had seen his waterproof folder lying on the floor, and realised that his visitor must not be allowed to get away. That shot, however, made a new man of Perry. From that moment, he says, though he was still frightened, he had a firm grip on himself. Something primitive shot up to the surface and possessed him: he was not going to stand for any old greybeard chivvying him with a revolver. He got behind the tree, took out his rifle, and fired.

"That was the beginning of a savage, grotesque sort of duel. There, in the sunlit wood, which seemed to afford so little cover for himself, so damnably much for his enemy, they started to shoot it out between them."

"But why didn't someone hear the shots?" asked Mrs. Thistlethwaite.

"Plenty of people did. But they were practising at the territorial camp all to-day, and any one would assume the sounds came from there—unless he happened to be very near the wood.

"Perry's first shot had sent the hermit behind his shack. He imagined he was still there, taking cover, till he heard the crack of a twig away to his left. He just managed in time to put the tree between himself and the attacker, whose second bullet hit the air where he'd been standing a second before. He fired back in the direction of the sound, and for an intolerable space of time there was absolute silence in the wood. It gave Perry leisure to realise three things: that the recluse had got between him and the camp; that the recluse knew every yard of the wood, whereas he himself had only been in it once before; and, worst of all, that his magazine might be empty.

"You see, when he lifted the rifle out of the shooting-gallery, he had not time to see whether the magazine was loaded—it was lying on the counter and someone might have already been firing it. It didn't really occur to him as at all likely that he might have to use it at all. But there he was now, with a very thin tree between him and a killer, knowing—in two senses of the word—that the next shot might be his last. Even if he had understood how to remove the magazine, so as to find out the number of bullets left in it, he obviously couldn't afford to do so at this stage of the proceedings.

"During his brief respite—if we can call it that—he decided that the attacker would be expecting him to retreat out of the wood in the direction he had already taken. He determined therefore to try and make a detour round to the eastward, which would bring him out on the road leading back to the camp. He found a large bit of dead wood, chucked it westward as far as he could, and as soon as he heard the hermit moving stealthily after it, began his detour.

"At first, marking each successive piece of cover with his eye, he made for it as fast as he could go. But the noise brought the attacker back after a little, and now Perry moved quite literally one foot at a time. He didn't have to worry much about whether his magazine was empty, since he didn't catch a glimpse of the other chap for about ten minutes: the spy was evidently an expert in the use of cover.

"This went on for some time, with Perry always on the retreat and getting gradually nearer the edge of the wood. He was not far from it when he suddenly heard a noise and saw the muzzle of a revolver thrusting through a bramble bush some fifty yards away, on the edge of a ride he had just crossed. He instinctively flinched aside. It saved his life. The bullet hit his arm just below the shoulder instead of the heart. He fell and lay still. Luckily, falling sideways, he got himself under cover. He managed to prop the rifle barrel silently up on the lowest branch of a bush—his left arm was useless—and hold it there. This meant, of course, that he couldn't turn round. If the attacker chose to approach him from behind, it was the finish.

"Luckily, after waiting for what seemed to Perry about an hour, the spy decided he must be dead. The war of nerves was over. The spy cautiously peered round the bush behind which he was kneeling. Perry took a long look through the peep-sight. He remembers feeling absurdly petulant because there was a spider's web hanging right in his line of fire—it nearly made him burst into tears, he told me. Then his enemy moved a little, and the spider's web wasn't in the way any longer, and he took careful aim and fired.

"It was a perfect shot, as you know. Perry, however, what with loss of blood and general nervous strain, immediately fainted. When he came to, it was half an hour later: he spent more time trying to remember exactly what had happened. It seemed very important to him to get the recent events in their correct sequence. The blood from his wound had clotted: he tied it up after a fashion and went to inspect his late opponent. The man was unquestionably dead. Perry himself was by now a little delirious, and that accounts for his subsequent actions."

"But why did he try and hide the rifle? Surely it doesn't explain that? He hadn't done anything wrong—I mean, the chap had shot at him first, and he was a spy," said Sally.

"Ah, that's just it, he didn't know—not for certain—that the man was a spy. He hadn't had time to examine the photographs in the shack, you remember. When you're in the semi-delirious state he was in, it's difficult to think of more than one thing at a time. Some idea or image enters your mind and squats there, puffing itself out like a giant toad, so that nothing else can come into the picture at all. That's how it was with Paul Perry. I have killed a man: I am a murderer: I could never prove it was in self-defence (yes, the wound in his own arm was proof enough, but for the moment he'd forgotten it): I must put back the rifle where I got it, so that nothing can be traced: camp sports start at 2.30, the coast will be clear then. That's the sort of way his mind worked.

"A hardened campaigner, of course, wound or no wound, would have kept enough reserve of sense and stamina to go at once to the shack and pick up the waterproof folder. But this was Perry's baptism of fire—and a pretty total immersion, too. He just kept repeating over to himself, I've shot a man, they'll call me a murderer. There had been other suspicions hanging over his head as well, he remembered vaguely. The Mad Hatter. The one thing he wanted was to get out of that damnable wood. We mustn't criticise him too severely."

"I should jolly well hope not," Sally cried indignantly. "I think he's marvellous. And, what's more, I'm going to tell him so."

"Not to-night, I shouldn't, dear. I expect the poor young man needs a good sleep," said her mother.

"When did you first—ah—tumble to the significance of his enigmatic conduct?" Mr. Thistlewaite inquired.

"There was a queer look, behind the fear and exhaustion that showed on the surface—a look of confidence, exhilaration, I can't quite put a name to it. The fact was, he'd made good, and the consciousness of it kept breaking through his nightmare. Then I asked him a question about the Mad Hatter and Old Ishmael, and he fainted right off. It came to me in a flash: he looked guilty, yet somehow set up—a new man; he had tried to hide the rifle; he had heard us talking about espionage in connection with the hermit; he fainted as soon as Old Ishmael's name was mentioned. Everything linked up into a coherent theory. So I rushed off to the wood with a posse."

There was a long silence. Finally Sally jumped up from the bed, an extraordinary light in her eyes. There was a kind of expectant, radiant certainty about her, as in the air when the four quarters have chimed and the great bell is on the point of striking the hour.

"But, don't you see?" she cried, "what a fool I am not to have thought of it before! This proves Paul's not the Mad Hatter. Daddy told me Captain Wise had been shot at this morning. Well, Paul was up in that wood. He couldn't have fired that shot."

"No, he couldn't have fired that shot," said Nigel slowly. There was no point, after all, in dashing her hopes so soon. Besides, she was probably right. Theoretically, of course, Paul Perry might have shot Captain Wise and then gone up to establish an alibi in the hermit's wood: but the notion of a criminal shooting one man in order to obtain an alibi for the attempted murder of another, though a pleasant enough conceit, could not be seriously entertained. Theoretically again, there was no proof that the shooting of Captain Wise had been the Mad Hatter's work; it had an impromptu appearance quite different from the previous outrages: therefore Paul Perry might still be considered leading candidate for the rôle of the Mad Hatter. But here again logic got one nowhere.

Back in his chalet, Nigel examined inch by inch the case he had constructed against the Mad Hatter. Everything fitted in neatly except the shot that had been fired at Captain Wise. He was still dispiritedly trying to solve that mystery a quarter of an hour later when Mr. Thistlethwaite entered. He had noticed Nigel's evasion of the issue when Sally had said that Paul could no longer be suspected of the practical jokes. They talked about this for a little. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite said:

"When you were called away from the sports, sir, you were just about to tell me why Mr. Morley could not have been the author of the outrage against Captain Wise."

"The answer is, he's the world's worst shot. Didn't you hear about the little episode between him and Teddy Wise in the shooting-gallery?"

"No."

Nigel related it. "If he couldn't hit those targets at a range of twenty yards, he certainly couldn't have pipped Captain Wise at a hundred and fifty."

"It might have been a lucky shot."

"But if he really wanted to kill Captain Wise—or Teddy, assuming that he mistook the one for the other—he'd never have adopted a method so risky to himself, knowing that he was such a rotten marksman. It'd never occur to him to try it."

"Perhaps he's really a good shot, and has been concealing the fact with a view to this crime."

"If that was so, and all the practical jokes were just leading up to the shooting of Wise, the crime was premeditated. And if the crime was premeditated, Morley wouldn't have been relying on the attendant forgetting to lock up the gallery this morning, and Wise appearing on the balcony. Nor would he have walked towards me out of that clump of trees, thus establishing himself as the only person near enough the place to have fired the shot, when he could easily have got right away by then."

"His behaviour was certainly paradoxical to a degree."

"You've said it. He's the spanner in the whole works. I've a strong feeling that it must have been he who fired the shot, and yet all logic is against it. Look here, Mr. Thistlethwaite, are you in a hurry for your beddy-byes? I'd like to outline the case to you, and see if a fresh mind can draw different conclusions from my own."

Mr. Thistlethwaite expressed himself agreeable to this. Nigel lit a cigarette and ran through the case, giving his companion a detailed outline but hinting at no theories.

When he had finished, Mr. Thistlethwaite kept silent for some time. Finally, studying the signet ring on his left hand, he said:

"This indeed puts a new complexion on the matter. I am compelled radically to revise my own ideas. On the strength of the facts stated by you, sir, I find myself looking in quite a different direction for the culprit. I find my eye focused upon Captain Wise and his charming secretary."

Mr. Thistlethwaite contrived to focus his eye upon these two individuals and at the same time give Nigel a shrewd glance. Nigel's expression, however, remained interested and non-committal.

"On what grounds?" he asked.

"First and foremost, my dear sir, opportunity——" Mr. Thistlethwaite mouthed the word as if it were a juicy plum. "They knew the field of operations intimately: they knew the dispositions of their own sentries, and thus could easily avoid them whenever it was time for the Mad Hatter to prowl again. Let us enumerate the manifestations in due order."

Nigel lit another cigarette and, leaning his head back on his chair, blew smoke up at the ceiling.

"First, the voice over the loud-speakers at the dance. Jones was admittedly close to the microphone; Wise could have slipped in through the side door. According to his brother, he is a good impersonator: it was needed for the squeaky tones of the Mad Hatter and the telephone calls to the *Applestock Gazette* that he should dissemble his real voice.

"Second, the duckings. Wise was in the water: he was one of the first to reach Sally after she'd gone under the second time. To divert any possible suspicion, he pretended later to have been ducked himself. Meanwhile the woman Jones posts up the Mad Hatter notice at the same time as the ordinary routine notices.

"Third, the two treacle episodes. Wise and Jones do not take their meals with the residents. They had the best opportunity for slipping, unnoticed or at least unchallenged, into the sports pavilion and the concert hall. At this point I must interpolate a reference to Wise's refusal at the games committee to accept the suggestion that the residents should aid in the search for the Mad Hatter, and his subsequent reluctance to call in the police."

Nigel opened one eye, and shut it again.

"For so efficient an organiser, he seemed remarkably half-hearted at the start in the measures he took. Fourth comes the matter of Mr. Perry's questionnaire. Strange that Captain Wise should allow him to take it without even inquiring into his bona-fides. Strange, unless he saw in the questionnaire a golden opportunity for keeping his finger, if I may so put it, on the pulse of the patient he was gradually poisoning. Remember Miss Jones's suggestion for an additional question, 'What single practical joke could you imagine playing which would most disorganise the life of the camp?' The accomplices hoped to gain some useful hints from the answers to that. The fact that Perry was allowed to see these answers might also be turned to advantage in the event of their wishing to make somebody a scapegoat.

"And Perry it was whom, later, they tried to implicate. Jones hints to you his interest in primitive initiation rites. Wise is conveniently at your side when you find the clue under Perry's chalet: if you had not found it, he would doubtless have contrived some method of making you find it. And it was he who called attention to the smell on the piece of wire."

" 'Later,' " said Nigel. "That's the difficulty, isn't it? Why should they not implicate Perry at the start? Or alternatively, why should they try and throw the blame on any one at that point, when nothing had happened to incriminate themselves? Or had it? Have you an answer to that?"

"Not on the spur of the moment, sir," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity. "But answer there doubtless is. To proceed: the incident of the poisoned dog points in no special direction. Suffice it to say that here again the deed could have been done more safely by Wise or Jones than by any resident wandering unauthorised to Pets' Corner in the small hours. It profitably raises, however, the question of means: all the paraphernalia of the practical jokes—strychnine, treacle, fireworks, and the rest. Were the miscreant one of the visitors, there would be a real danger of these things being discovered in his chalet, by a maid or some other visitor. The chalets, indeed, were searched on one occasion, but none of these articles was found. How much easier for Wise and Jones to keep them concealed.

"Next we come to the macabre episode of the dead animals. I will only touch upon this lightly, contenting myself with pointing out that, though the man Wise was present throughout the cabaret show and in evidence at the interval, his accomplice, Jones, who was talking with Perry at the beginning of the interval, was called away to the telephone. From whom did that call come," boomed Mr. Thistlethwaite impressively, "and did she, in fact, ever answer it? The question, in my view, is linked up significantly with that of motive. I will now proceed to deal with the question of motive in some detail. It is abundantly substantiated, in the first place, that——"

A sharp snore broke from Nigel, so sharp that it woke him up.

"You were saying, Mr. Thistlethwaite——?"

"It will keep, sir. No, pray do not apologise. It is I who should apologise, for my thoughtlessness in keeping you up after so arduous a day. I can only plead that I was absorbed: a romantic at heart, I have never before met with the romance of crime, except in the pages of detective fiction, and——"

" 'The romance of crime!' " Nigel suddenly exclaimed. "Oh, thank you for those words, dear Mr. Thistlethwaite! They've given me the clue—the key to the one lock that's been defeating me. To-morrow, if you will, you shall repeat your theory to a select little audience. You shall help to unveil the Mad Hatter."

PART III

MR. STRANGEWAYS TAKES TEA

Chapter XVII

The next morning, Friday, the weather broke. A dismal haar came up from the sea, shrouding the camp in its grey mist that damped the spirits and reminded many visitors of the dingy towns to which to-morrow they must return. There was, perhaps, a certain anti-climax, too, in the fact that last night the Mad Hatter had done nothing: nerves had been strung up to expect some new attack, and in the morning they still quivered—tired but unsatisfied. After breakfast the residents wandered about rather aimlessly. The finals of the various tournaments—tennis, bowls, clock-golf—should have been taking place this morning, but the thick mist would render most of them impossible. Yet it seemed a cruel waste of the last day of vacation to spend it indoors.

This, together with a certain physical uneasiness—a kind of claustrophobia—created by the enveloping fog, bred dissatisfaction amongst the residents. A deputation from the sports committee, headed by the formidable Miss Gardiner, approached Captain Wise and asked what progress had been made in the Mad Hatter investigation. The manager turned them over to Nigel, who told them that he had the case well in hand.

"Now, young man," commented Miss Gardiner, "you can't put me off with that kind of eyewash. We represent the visitors, and we have a right to know what's being done. Have you, or have you not, found out the truth?"

"Yes. I have found out the truth."

"Well, then——"

"Do you, or do you not, want a scandal in the camp, Miss Gardiner?" said Nigel, matching her pedagogue's aggressiveness with a manner even more magisterial. The deputation glanced uncertainly at each other. Only Miss Gardiner remained four-square for the truth.

"You mean, I take it, that the management wants you to hush the whole thing up?"

"The position is a little difficult, Miss Gardiner. If we publish the name of the culprit, he might receive very rough handling from the visitors; as you say, they're worked up this morning. On the other hand, apart from the poisoning of the dog, there's no charge we could bring against him in court. He has not done any damage. The duckings scarcely amount to an assault in the legal sense."

"But this is outrageous. Is he to get off scot-free?"

Nigel delicately placed a finger on Miss Gardiner's weakness, saying:

"Under ordinary circumstances, no. But, as an expert psychologist, I know you will agree with me that certain delinquencies are best treated by psychotherapy rather than by disciplinary measures."

The schoolmistress gave him a gratified smile and a look of ponderous complicity.

"Of course. I understand. Yes, that alters the whole case. I see, Mr. Strangeways, that it can safely be left in your hands."

With a curt nod to the other members of the deputation, a nod that silenced any protests they might have wished to make, she ushered them away as if dismissing a class.

Nigel told Captain Wise he had got rid of her. "But how long they'll keep quiet, I can't guarantee," he said. "I was thinking of getting together this afternoon the people concerned, and giving a report on the case. Perhaps I'd better ask Miss Gardiner to attend, too. Only, it'll be rather a squash in my chalet."

"Why not use my sitting-room?" Captain Wise suggested. "What time would suit you?"

"Shall we say four o'clock? I should have cleared up the various odds and ends by then, and it wouldn't interfere with the normal camp programme. The others will be at tea."

"Very well. And I'll arrange for tea to be brought up here. How many will be coming?"

"Perry—the doctor says he can get about this afternoon: Mr. Thistlethwaite and Sally; Albert Morley; Miss Gardiner; your brother. That makes nine, including us two and Miss Jones."

"And the Mad Hatter is one of these?"

"We'll have to decide upon that when I've made my report."

Nigel spent the rest of the morning interviewing certain of the visitors and the Wonderland staff. Had he wished any of his movements to be unobserved, he could not have asked a better day for it. The fog, swirling over the camp in swathe after swathe though there seemed to be no wind to account for its mobility, blanketed the buildings and kept most of the residents indoors. The few he met peered cautiously at him till they were certain of his identity: it was evident that they were on edge, fearing the fog as a stalking-ground for the Mad Hatter. Even indoors, playing at the pintables, at darts, billiards, or whatever recreation took its fancy, Wonderland was strangely subdued. The nervous strain of the last week, with all its queer tricks, rumours and apprehensions, had stretched nerves tauter than most realised. There was a feeling about—it coiled insidiously like the clammy sea-mist into every corner of the camp—that on this, the last full day of the holiday week, the Mad Hatter would penetrate some crowning deed of malice. This feeling was heightened by the mystery of Captain Wise and Paul Perry, for the visitors had not been told the story of yesterday's events. Captain Wise for his part, declaring that it would cause real panic in the camp if it were known that the practical joker had turned to shooting, insisted on the matter being hushed up: while certain very high Authorities, who had been in touch with Nigel and the local police by telephone, were equally insistent that the death of "Mr. Charles Black" should receive no publicity at all.

At lunch-time Nigel was in Applestock, conferring with the Naval Intelligence and the Chief Constable. At an identity parade he was able to pick out the man who had passed the "betting-slip" to the spy. Later, he visited a poky, smelly little shop in the old quarter of the town. The police car returned him to Wonderland at half-past three . . .

At four o'clock they were filing through the manager's office into his sitting-room. There was a certain self-consciousness evident in most of them as they sat down at the table, already laid for tea, as if they were about to play a round game whose rules they did not know. Captain Wise indicated that Miss Gardiner, the oldest lady present, should sit at the head of the table: Nigel was given the other end, his back to the balcony window. When they were all seated, he took a quick look round.

On his left was Paul Perry, his arm in a sling, pale and a little uneasy, but with that faint, underlying expression of triumph still perceptible. Beside him, radiant and protective, a grey-eyed Athene, was Sally Thistlethwaite. Next to Sally sat Teddy Wise, his magnificent body in its green Wonderland jersey almost blotting out Albert Morley beyond. On the other side of Miss Gardiner, who was putting on her pince-nez with a judicial gesture, Captain Wise sat: he had the relaxed expression of one who had handed over a responsibility. Next to him was Miss Jones, and between her and Nigel was stationed the attentive bulk of Mr. Thistlethwaite.

"I wonder would you mind changing places with Mr. Thistlethwaite?" said Nigel to Miss Jones. "It will be more convenient if I want you to take any notes."

Mr. Thistlethwaite arose, handed her to his chair with a courtly gesture, and sat down in her place, carefully hitching up one trouser-leg and placing it over the other, momentarily the image of an Edwardian roué about to take an aperitif at Biarritz. He wore for this momentous occasion a cream-coloured flannel suit and a carnation in his buttonhole.

"Well, ladies and gentlemen," said Nigel, "by Captain Wise's kind permission you've been asked here to listen to my report on the Mad Hatter business. In one way or another each of you has been closely involved with it, so it's only fair that you should be the first—perhaps it will be the only—people to know the real truth about it."

"Hear, hear!" barked Miss Gardiner.

"It was been a peculiarly difficult case for us to solve, not because there was any unusual subtlety behind the outrages or because the motive for them was far to seek, but because of the irrelevances that crept in and the impossibility under the circumstances of collating alibis. One of the irrelevances was the affair that has led to Perry's having his arm in a sling: those who know the facts of that affair have been sworn to silence, and I am not allowed to say anything more about it than that it has no reference to the business of this afternoon."

There was a marked stir, and mystified glances were exchanged by several of the company. Miss Gardiner drew herself up, as if to deliver a reprimand, but catching a cool look from Nigel she subsided again.

"The other irrelevance I shall come to in a minute," he went on. "As I say, owing to the great number of visitors here and the informal way in which they turn up to meals, wander in and out and around, and so on, it would have been impossible to establish alibis for most of the occasions when the Mad Hatter was laying his little snares. Besides this, Captain Wise was prevented from conducting really stringent inquiries in the earlier part of the week by his natural fear of upsetting his guests. It was out of the question for me to examine the alibis of each of these four hundred or so people for several different occasions, since the important thing was to catch up with the Mad Hatter *quickly.* I had to adopt other methods. I looked first for motive. There were several possible motives. First, that X was a practical joker just for the fun of the thing: second, that he was a case of split personality: third, that he had some reason for destroying the reputation of Wonderland: fourth, that he had launched a series of practical jokes as a smoke-screen for a more serious attack upon some single individual.

"The first motive could be dismissed fairly soon. A practical joker pure and simple would not persist in his tricks when he realised how violently public opinion had turned against him: nor is it likely that he would have communicated his campaign step by step to the Press. The fourth motive also is put out of court, by the simple fact that no serious attack *has* been made upon any one here."

"Oy, oy!" protested Teddy Wise. "If one of the little chaps may interrupt—what about the bullet that just missed imbedding itself in my brother's bulging brain?"

"That brings me to the second irrelevance I mentioned."

"It wasn't so irrelevant for me," said Captain Wise, stroking his bandaged ear.

"Irrelevance?" said Esmeralda Jones. "Do you mean it wasn't the Mad Hatter who shot Captain Wise?"

Nigel glanced blandly round the table. "Captain Wise," he announced, "was of course shot by Albert Morley."

The sensation was terrific. Miss Gardiner leapt in her seat and took up a knife, as if to defend herself against the rosy-faced, chubby little killer who sat next her. Sally looked as if she would like to take a knife to Nigel. Captain Wise stared at his alleged assailant with incredulity. Paul Perry jerked round to look at Albert, hurt his wounded arm and drew in his breath sharply. Even Miss Jones's impassive mannequin's face showed emotion. As for Albert himself, his mouth fell open and he froze quite still like a small animal trying to evade notice. At last Teddy Wise exclaimed, with a not very convincing jocularity:

"Oh, Albert, you naughty little man! Hey, wait a minute, though! You've drawn the wrong number, Strangeways. Albert couldn't have done that. He's a hopeless shot. He couldn't hit a haystack."

"Albert hit Captain Wise *because* he was such a bad shot," replied Nigel, whom an Oxford education had imbued with regrettable leanings towards the paradox.

"Give me air!" exclaimed Teddy.

"I think you're talking boloney," said Sally.

"Albert was the only person to be found near the scene of the crime," Nigel continued. "He walked out to meet me from a clump of trees beyond the shooting-gallery. Now Albert has many admirable qualities; but they do not include, I fancy, the kind of nerve to carry off a bluff like that—supposing he had really intended to kill Captain Wise. The fact is that, as I might have gathered at once from the horror he showed when I told him that Captain Wise had been shot, he had no intention to hit him at all. I was faced with this contradiction: the only person who, geographically speaking, could have fired the shot, was such a bad shot that it was a thousand to one against his hitting the target. I left that aside, and asked myself why should Albert have fired at all. Mr. Thistlethwaite ingeniously suggested that he'd mistaken Captain Wise for his brother, against whom he might reasonably have a certain ill feeling. But the impromptu nature of the crime, together with Albert's knowledge that he was a hopeless marksman, put this suggestion out of the running.

"I approached the question from another angle. I had heard from Sally that she'd told Albert how Perry was worrying himself to death believing he might be the Mad Hatter—or was suspected of being. Albert would do anything for Sally. Albert knew that Perry was going for a long walk yesterday. That was the set-up. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite, in another context, used the phrase 'the romance of crime,' and I saw in a flash the one explanation that would account for everything. Albert Morley is an incorrigible romantic. He has been brooding about how to take this load of anxiety off Sally's mind and Paul's. He happens to be by the shooting-gallery when Captain Wise appears up on the balcony. Albert says to himself in a twinkling, 'If I fire up at the balcony, the shot will be assumed to come from the Mad Hatter. Paul is away from camp on a long walk. Therefore the shot will prove that he is *not* the Mad Hatter. Q.E.D.'

"Mind you, any one might have argued in those terms, but only a hardened romantic would have acted on them. I should add that Albert, having been given an alibi by Mr. Thistlethwaite for the dead-animals joke, believed that he was quite safe—shot or no shot—from being suspected of the Mad Hatter outrages. Anyway, he ups and fires, meaning the bullet to whiz harmlessly and at a respectful distance past Captain Wise's head. But his excitement aggravates his fault of jerking at the trigger instead of squeezing it, the muzzle is jerked to the right, and the bullet takes a chip out of our resident manager. That's so, isn't it, Albert?"

"I—yes, I'm afraid it is. It was awfully stupid of me, I'm afraid," Albert Morley stammered. He added, with ludicrous formality, "I must take this opportunity, Captain WIse, of expressing my deepest regrets. I——"

"That's all right, Morley. No bones broken." The manager turned to Nigel. "So we're back where we started?"

"Yes. In a sense. Perry has not got the alibi which Albert tried to give him, and Mr. Thistlethwaite told me last night that Albert's own alibi for the dead-animals stunt has a hole in it. So we all start from scratch again."

Sally's face was white with indignation. But she had been told that no word of Paul's experience yesterday must get out; so, biting her lip, she refrained from speech.

Nigel now gave a brief outline of the case, on the same lines as the one he had given to Mr. Thistlethwaite last night. When he had finished, he said:

"There are the facts. We now come to theory."

"Just a minute, Mr. Strangeways," said Miss Gardiner, in a voice a little louder than she generally used. "Let me get this clear. What is your object in having us all to listen to this? Am I to assume that, amongst those sitting round the table, is the Mad Hatter himself?"

A knock at the door made every one start. It rapped on nerves suddenly tautened by Miss Gardiner's question. But the person who entered was only an attendant bringing in the trays of tea-things. Putting them down on the sideboard, she retired.

"Ah, tea," said Nigel, rubbing his hands together. "It'll make a nice break. Between the fact and the theory," he intoned, in the manner of a young lady from a school of elocution rendering one of Mr. Eliot's choruses, "comes the cucumber sandwich."

There was a general movement and polite jostling as the men helped to place the tea-things on the table. There were plates of sandwiches, some covered dishes, and two teapots.

"Your chef has done us proud," said Nigel, beaming at the array of food.

Miss Gardiner appeared to be having some difficulty with the first teapot.

"It won't pour," she said; and, lifting the lid, peered inside. The next moment, with a curious little scream, she banged the teapot down on the table again and jumped on to her chair. Every one stared at her. Pince-nez awry, cheeks puffed out, she pointed dumbly towards the teapot. A scrabbling noise came from it; and presently a sizeable white mouse poked its head out, quivered its whiskers, looked round nervously at the company, and withdrew again from sight.

There was a moment's complete silence. Then Miss Jones, with a shaky laugh, exclaimed:

"God! It's the dormouse! The dormouse they put into the teapot! This is the Mad Hatter's tea party."

Captain Wise sprang towards the door that led into his office. The door was locked.

"Who the devil?—I'll go out on the balcony and see if there's any one below. This is outrageous."

"Just a minute, Captain Wise," said Nigel. "There's no special hurry. Let's all sit down and see what this adds up to. Allow me." He decanted the mouse out of the teapot, seized it and placed it outside on the balcony. Miss Gardiner descended from her chair with considerably less agility than she had mounted it. Albert Morley, helping her down, remarked:

"There was no cause for alarm. It was a tame mouse. I used to keep white ones like that when I was a boy."

"I am not interested, Morley, whether you kept white mice or white elephants," the schoolmistress replied in rasping tones. "One thing is perfectly clear, that this specious detective has been duped again. The Mad Hatter is *not* in this room——"

"Why should you assume that he was?" asked Nigel mildly.

"He has made a complete fool of us. It's the most humiliating position to be in—I will not tolerate it—let me out."

"Now, now, now. The only way you can get out is to jump off the balcony. Let's all keep cool."

"I suggest we should go on with our tea. Ha! Muffins, I fancy," said Mr. Thistlethwaite: and, suiting the action to the word, lifted the cover from one of the dishes. It was not muffins. It was a small, forked piece of wood.

"What on earth is this?" he asked, gingerly taking it out. "A catapult?"

"Great Scot!" exclaimed Captain Wise. "The rocket stick!"

"Mortimer!" Miss Jones's voice cut through the clamour like a whip. Every one turned to her. "He must have—quick, what's in the other dishes?"

There was a moment of hesitation. It seemed that no one wanted to lift off the covers. Then Paul Perry, pushing back the lock of hair that fell over his forehead, said:

"Well, I'll try the next surprise-packet."

He raised a lid. Beneath it lay the body of a dead thrush.

"Oh, this is horrible!" Sally hid her face in her hands. Soon the remaining covered dishes were exposed, revealing severally a small bottle labelled "Strychnine," two halves of a tennis ball filled with treacle, and a .22 bullet embedded in a piece of cotton wool.

"Well now, this is most interesting," declared Nigel. "The case is certainly beginning to look up. Our practical joker is a symbolist. But surely there's something missing? Yes, the duckings. That was the one joke he couldn't put under a lid, so to speak. Unless——" he giggled—"I say, what's in that other teapot?"

Teddy Wise went over to the sideboard and fetched it. "Doesn't look like tea," he said. He put his finger inside, licked it cautiously, and exclaimed: "Christmas! It's salt water!"

"Ah! That rounds it off. Splendid!" said Nigel, taking another sandwich. It was too much for Captain Wise, who burst out irritably:

"Look here, Strangeways. The thing's preposterous. The fellow must have bribed that waitress to bring all this stuff in, and lock the door on us. We've only got to break out and get hold of her, and I'll soon find out who the chap is."

"Get hold of her? Did you notice her face? Your back was turned. Did any one pay attention to her?"

No one, it turned out, had done so.

"Gosh!" said Sally. "Was she the Mad Hatter in disguise?"

"We're all being slightly ridiculous," Miss Jones said tartly. "Tea was ordered for ten minutes ago. If that waitress was the Mad Hatter in disguise, where's the real one that should have been sent up from the kitchen? Were these dishes substituted on the way? How——"

"Perhaps the proper waitress was intercepted on her way here, and dealt with," suggested Mr. Thistlethwaite in blood-curdling tones.

"Now, we mustn't let ourselves get rattled like this," said Nigel. "There's quite a simple explanation for all these death's-heads at the banquet. Let's go back to the point at which we left off. I gave you a statement of the case. Before I offer my own interpretation of it, I should like to hear any theories you may have. You can speak without prejudice, as the lawyers say, because nothing that is said need go beyond this room."

"This is most irregular," declared Miss Gardiner.

"Are you asking us to say who we think the Mad Hatter is?" asked Teddy Wise.

"Yes. From the facts I've given you, it ought to be apparent."

The joke which had just been played on them, after the first nervous shock was over, seemed to create a kind of irresponsibility among them. Tension was relaxed, for the grotesque objects that lay in the dishes before them made the whole atmosphere unreal. The tacit assumption was that this joke could only have been played by someone outside the room, and thus to accuse any one inside it became a harmless and academic matter.

Miss Gardiner repeated her lecture on the psychology of the practical joker, and pointed out how well it fitted the character of Albert Morley. Captain Wise, indicating the clues which seemed to incriminate Paul Perry, said apologetically that he had suspected Paul of the outrages for some time. Then Mr. Thistlethwaite arose and unfolded the case against Captain Wise and Miss Jones, as he had put it last night to Nigel.

". . . And now," he said at last, "I come to the question of motive. Why should these two, whose fortunes might seem to stand or fall with those of Wonderland, kill—if I may so express it—the goose that laid the golden eggs? The answer is that the eggs were not big enough. Miss Jones, the daughter of a millionaire, accustomed to a life of idle luxury, finds herself working for her living on the pittance of a secretary. Captain Wise, whose salary we have been told by several people is by no means commensurate with his abilities or ambitions, and is certainly not adequate to the running of a Lagonda, the purchase of the gold wristwatches, cigarette cases and other trinkets that he sports——"

"Really, Mr. Strangeways," exclaimed Esmeralda Jones icily, "aren't you letting this go too far? It's in abominably bad taste."

"So were the practical jokes, Miss Jones. Don't forget that."

The atmosphere in the room, which had been imperceptibly growing more tense, shedding little by little its unreality, was now taut to breaking point. Nigel's tone, as he made this last remark, brought up every head with a jerk. All their eyes turned on Miss Jones. Bold chin lifted, red lips curling disdainfully, she stared back at Nigel. She did not give an inch. Captain Wise's fingers drummed on the table: he looked strangely ineffectual and shrunken, out of his depth altogether.

"The motive," said Nigel, "is as Mr. Thistlethwaite has stated. Captain Wise, I learnt, ran through a considerable legacy a few years ago. He does run through money; and so does Miss Jones. Several of us have noticed that he lives more expensively than his salary warrants: but, his brother told me, he has no private means."

"Strangeways, this is the grossest impertinence. I——"

"So here we have this ambitious, luxury-loving couple, perhaps already in debt, certainly on the lookout for some way of bettering themselves. At this point a Mr. Leyman comes into the picture. He is the man behind the big holiday-camps company that runs the place at Beale and is Wonderland's chief rival. Miss Arnold told me that she had seen Leyman talking to Captain Wise and Miss Jones in a London restaurant some months before. Now there was nothing necessarily suspicious about that. But, when I mentioned it to Miss Jones, she at once volunteered a great deal of information about Leyman. She had known him in her palmier days, she said; and, when things went wrong, he tried to take advantage of her unfortunate position. This again may have been true: though I cannot easily imagine her hobnobbing in a restaurant with a man who had shown up in that light. But why should she give me this information at all? There was no need for it, *unless she had to divert my attention from some different relationship between her and Leyman.* That relationship, I suggest, was our dear old friend, the cash-nexus. Leyman had agreed to set up Jones and Wise for life, if they in return smashed the company which was his chief rival."

"For sheer fantasy," said Miss Jones, "this beats the Mad Hatter every time. Does any one here really imagine that respectable business companies conduct themselves like the villains in a pantomime?"

"Of course they do. If they can't get what they want in any other way.

Look at the bribery and cloak-and-dagger stuff that goes on in the armament trade. Look at the methods some big newspaper-owners have adopted to push old-established provincial papers out of competition. Oh, no, there's nothing fantastic about the movie. The fantastic method of operations that was adopted is quite another matter. I attribute it to Miss Jones, who has great intelligence and a highly-developed sense of mischief. She was the comic genius behind the Mad Hatter: I think she was also the moving spirit behind the whole affair—I doubt if Captain Wise would have undertaken it without her prompting. But, like many intelligent criminals, she over-reached herself."

"I've listened patiently to this—this rigmarole of yours, Strangeways. I can only say that, if any one has overreached himself, it's you. I must advise you to be very careful how——"

"Mr. Thistlethwaite pointed out that, of all the people in the camp, the manager and his secretary had by far the best opportunity for carrying out the practical jokes," Nigel continued imperturbably. "They knew the terrain, they knew where the sentries were posted, they could keep the materials for the jokes safely hidden; above all, they were the only pair of people in the camp who could be imagined as working together over the jokes, and the business of the duckings and the Mad Hatter's notice that was pinned up at the same time strongly suggested the work of accomplices.

"So we come to the Mad Hatter's tea party, his last laugh. It was intended, of course, to prove that the Mad Hatter could not be any of those present. But it was when they overreached themselves most disastrously. For it's quite evident that no one but these two could possibly have organised the tea party. It was Captain Wise's suggestion that we should have tea, in the first place. His staff are devoted to him; the waitress, who brought in the tea and no doubt substituted these sinister oddments for the cakes she was supposed to bring in, would never give him away. He may even have told her that it was part of a trap to catch the Mad Hatter. And it did catch him, which was the last thing he intended. You're all reasonable people. Can any of you imagine how this last trick could have been managed by any one but Captain Wise and Miss Jones?"

Silence gave the answer. Besides, several of those at the table had noticed angry, baffled, questioning glances passing between the two. At last Miss Jones spoke, in a high, furious voice.

"You haven't brought forward an atom of proof for your ridiculous theory. And as for this tea party, which you pretend——"

"I haven't brought forward an atom of proof?" Nigel's voice slashed across hers and quelled it. "Very well. I will now, as you're asking for it. Your accomplice tripped up badly over this tea party. He tripped up on a piece of wood."

Nigel suddenly reached forward and picked up the forked stick out of the dish. He held it aloft. He asked:

"Did any one notice something odd about this?"

To every one's surprise it was Albert Morley who broke the puzzled silence, bobbing his head, blushing, saying timidly:

"Well, I did think it rather queer that Captain Wise should have called it a rocket stick. I mean, it isn't one, is it?"

"Exactly! But a stick like this was used to support and aim the rocket that was fired over the head of the crowd in the avenue that night. As soon as I'd found it—and I arrived first on the scene, remember—I put the stick in my pocket. I told *no one* about its existence. It follows therefore that no one but the person who fired the rocket could have recognised this fork of wood. Miss Jones realised just now how her accomplice had given the whole thing away by that slip of the tongue: she cried out 'Mortimer!'; then she tried to pass it off, but it was too late. Captain Wise, have you any answer to that?"

Every one was staring at the manager. His hands fluttered, he tried to speak, but the answer was already written on his face.

Chapter XVIII

Travelling back to London next morning, in the same compartment as Nigel Strangeways and the Thistlethwaites, Paul Perry allowed his mind to wander idly over that extraordinary tea party. He felt a delicious languor stealing across his senses—Sally's shoulder was pressed confidingly against his—yet his mind was clear and alert. Strangeways, he had to admit, though a bit too much the frivolous Oxford type, had done well. There was something about him which had reduced to impotence even the efficient Captain Wise and the brilliant Esmeralda Jones. Yes, somehow or other he had made Miss Jones look foolish, had turned the opinion of the meeting against her.

Even after the collapse of her accomplice she had held her ground. Paul could still see her vivid, angry, disdainful expression as she said: "You know perfectly well you have no real proof. You can do nothing."

For a moment it had seemed as if she would win yet. Then Strangeways had said, in that cold, unruffled, analytic voice of his, which made you feel that some abstract problem was being weighed up with the accuracy of a scientific instrument:

"Proof in the strict legal sense I have none. But every one at this table believes that I am right—yes, even Captain Wise's brother has to admit it." Teddy Wise, avoiding his brother's eye, nodded despondently. "I shall write down a full account of the case and this afternoon's proceedings. This report will be signed by all those present except Miss Jones and Captain Wise. If Captain Wise will agree to write a confession of his responsibility for the Mad Hatter outrages, I shall proceed no further with the matter, except to ensure that neither of the accomplices profits out of their association with this Mr. Leyman. If, on the other hand, Captain Wise, you refuse to sign a confession, I shall send in my report to your directors as well as to my uncle. Provided, of course, that you all agree this is the best course of action."

The meeting agreed without a murmur. The combination of Nigel's quiet, reasonable voice and compelling eye was enough for them. They were bewildered still; they wanted a lead, and they got it. Paul admired the neat way in which Nigel had thrust a wedge between the accomplices. He had done it physically, too; for the huge form of Mr. Thistlethwaite, interposed between Captain Wise and Miss Jones, insulated the manager from the current of resistance that still flowed strongly through his partner. He was the weak end of their axis, and it was upon him that Nigel had skilfully brought all the pressure to bear.

"Pull yourself together, Mortimer," said Miss Jones fiercely. "He hasn't a leg to stand on and he knows it. He's faked up this phoney case against us simply because he couldn't discover the real culprit. Let him send in his damned report if he likes. No one will believe it. I could pull it to pieces in a minute."

But her vibrant voice lost urgency: she was made slightly ridiculous by having to talk round Mr. Thistlethwaite. Nigel said:

"You must make up your own mind, Captain Wise. Unless you wish to remain under this young lady's thumb for the rest of your life."

Captain Wise raised his head; looked at the cold, embarrassed faces all round him. His own face, that had seemed capable, easy-going, amiable, now looked simply weak. He was sick of it all, evidently—sick of being constantly spurred on, as if by a too potent drug, by an ambition and vitality so much greater than his own. Running his hand through his thin hair, he said:

"Oh, very well. I'll do what you say."

Esmeralda Jones sprang to her feet. For an instant Nigel feared she was going to fling herself at her lover.

"You're contemptible, Mortimer. Abject and contemptible. Beaten by a little bluff. I hope to God I never see you again."

She strode to the door, forgetting it was locked. In anger, her beauty and dignity were so great that even the locked door could not detract from them. She stood against the door, quite still, facing them all with a level gaze as Captain Wise wrote his confession.

When it was signed, Nigel said to him more kindly:

"You did your best to ruin the camp. Now you'll have the job of setting it on its feet again. I think we all can wish you luck . . ."

Now, glancing covertly at Nigel who was immersed in the short stories of Tchehov, Paul Perry thought of something which had been puzzling him off and on ever since yesterday's tea party.

"I say. That forked piece of wood—well, it got him in a cleft stick—but wasn't it frightfully stupid of them to use it as one of the Mad Hatter symbols? They couldn't have put a whole rocket in the dish, but surely they might have managed something else to convey the rocket episode."

Nigel put the book down on his lap. A quizzical light appeared in his pale blue eyes.

"I wondered when somebody would think of that."

Mr. Thistlethwaite raised an impressive forefinger. "The whole tea party was a grave error on their part. Vaulting ambition, I have always found, doth o'erleap itself. Were I a criminal, my motto would be 'Leave well alone.' "

"Yes," said Nigel. "They weren't as stupid as all that, though. Give credit where credit's due. It was *my* tea party."

Sally gasped. "You mean, you arranged for all those horrible things to be put in the dishes? And the dormouse in the teapot?"

"It wasn't a dormouse, actually. I couldn't get one. I had to buy a tame mouse in Applestock."

They all gazed at him, in silent awe. Finally Sally managed to speak:

"Really, my pet, couldn't you have warned us?"

"Sally," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite, "you shouldn't call gentlemen your pet in a railway carriage."

"I think he's sweet," said Sally. "But he might have told us. I nearly passed away when that dead thrush appeared."

"Had we not all been genuinely surprised, the miscreants would have smelt a rat. Shock tactics, to be efficacious, depend on absolute secrecy."

"Just so, Mr. Thistlethwaite. I can tell you, none of you suffered like I did at that tea party. The whole thing was a monstrous bluff, and just about as flimsy as a balloon. But, as Miss Jones far too clearly saw, I had no real proof at all. So I had to get Captain Wise rattled somehow or other. But I never expected he'd give himself away like that over the forked stick. I felt as if I'd bowled him out with a long hop."

"But how did you manage it at all? Was that waitress a plain-clothes woman in disguise?" Paul asked.

"No. She's a bona-fide waitress all right. I enlisted her aid in the morning. Told her I wanted her help to expose the Mad Hatter. Swore her to secrecy. Then, just before the tea party, I gave her the various things to put in the teapots and dishes, and told her to lock the door behind her when she went out. That door had to be locked, otherwise the astute Esmeralda would have made a bee-line for the servants' quarters and wrung the truth out of the waitress. Luckily, Captain Wise had suggested giving us tea—I fixed the meeting for a time when he couldn't very well have avoided doing so."

"But do you mean to say you arranged all that elaborate stunt just on the chance that it would make Captain Wise give himself away?" Paul inquired, with a trace of his old, aggressive, I-only-want-to-know manner. Then, feeling Sally's hand against his, he added more restrainedly, "It does seem a bit of a gamble."

"It was. But I'd never have got past their guard any other way. If it had been a straight criminal case, with the police in on it, we could have worked by less spectacular and much sounder methods—traced purchases of strychnine, treacle, fireworks; investigated every alibi; perhaps even uncovered more of the association between Leyman and my two suspects. But who was I amongst so many? That kind of routine investigation was out of the question. Besides, I had to work quickly: Wise was going to pay me off to-day, I have no doubt. And then you wasted a lot of my time holding shooting-matches with enemy aliens."

"Ouch! That's my bad arm, Sally!" Paul exclaimed.

"Darling, I'm sorry. I go all queer and clutch people for support when that dreadful man is mentioned."

"De mortuis, my dear, de mortuis," reproved her father. "Though it was on behalf of an undemocratic régime, we must allow that the man was but doing his duty."

"Had Strangeways coached you in that exposure you made, Mr. Thistlethwaite?" Paul asked presently. "Or was it your own unaided work?"

"Mr. Strangeways' mind and mine, sir, proceeded along very similar lines. I was only repeating a theory of the case which I had already propounded to him," replied Mr. Thistlethwaite with dignity. He turned to Nigel. "In the hurly-burly of the last few days, I did not have all the opportunities for conversation with you that I could have wished. I should esteem it a privilege, sir, if you would enlighten me on two points. How did you first come to suspect the manager and his secretary? And what was it you meant when you told me to pay special attention to the *time* when the clues apparently incriminating Mr. Perry first appeared?"

"I think it was the odd way that Wise behaved with Miss Jones that drew my attention to them. She was obviously a very confidential secretary: yet, during my first interview with them, he twice ticked her off as if she was a mere incompetent stenographer. Captain Wise was normally a polite, considerate man: so his treatment of Miss Jones on this occasion seemed out of character. It was, of course, a clumsy attempt to impress upon me that his relationship with her was no more than the usual employer-employee one. He may be good at impersonations, but he's pretty amateurish as an actor: his effects were much too crude."

"I noticed his up and down behaviour with Miss Jones, too," said Paul. "I thought it was because he was the weaker character and had to assert himself now and then."

"There was something of that in it, too. You yourself, by the way, gave me an idea early on. You asked me what sort of people I got as clients—whether they were people afraid to call in the police. It was a bit odd, after all, that the management hadn't called them in. I know Captain Wise kept saying he mustn't do anything to upset the residents——"

"We'd all much rather have had the police in than feel the Mad Hatter was still at large and nothing being done about it," said Mrs. Thistlethwaite.

"Exactly. That's just what I thought. And it would have absolved Wise from responsibility in the eyes of his directors. There were other little points that made me suspicious of him. For instance, when the story of the outrages began to appear in the Press, he affected to be wild with rage. Yet he refused to speak to the *Applestock Gazette* over the phone—told me to handle the matter. Rather a volte-face, considering that a minute before he'd been breathing fire and brimstone against them: but understandable on the theory that it was he who had supplied them with the information and was afraid, though he'd spoken to them in a disguised voice, lest they should recognise his ordinary one through the context.

"I set a little dilemma for him on those lines the day before yesterday. I rang up the *Gazette* and told them to call me back at once if the Mad Hatter got on to them about the latest practical joke. I informed Wise what I had done. This put him in a quandary. He wouldn't dare communicate the latest story to the *Gazette* now, for he knew I'd go to the public box, and, finding no one there, would suspect the Mad Hatter call of coming from the phone in his office. So the Mad Hatter kept mum that day. But only the *Gazette,* the manager, and I, knew of this little plan. Unless the manager *was* the Mad Hatter, why was the *Gazette* not informed of the latest outrage in the usual way?"

"Devilish smart, sir! Capital!" applauded Mr. Thistlethwaite with vast enthusiasm.

"But the most conclusive piece of evidence against these two was the point Mr. Thistlethwaite asked about just now. At a certain stage in the series of outrages, clues began to be laid incriminating Paul Perry. If the Mad Hatter had wished to divert suspicion from himself by casting it on someone else, why did he not do so from the start? The only answer was, something must have happened recently to threaten his sense of security. Consider for a moment the order of events. The warning over the loudspeakers, the duckings, the two treacle episodes, the poisoning of the dog, the treasure-hunt and the false alarm about Phyllis Arnold's injuries, the dead-animals incident. It was not till this last occurred that any tangible clue turned up—the piece of wire underneath Paul's chalet. Now it was arguable, of course, that here I had found a perfectly genuine clue; and Paul complicated matters by his own behaviour. But I could imagine no reasonable motive for him, unless he was indeed—as he suggested—a schizophrenic.

"But suppose the clue had been planted. What had happened recently to incriminate the real culprit? What about Miss Arnold's blisters? They had been caused by touching wild parsley. At this point we had not yet proved that the thing was an accident. But, if it was part of the practical jokes, it pointed exclusively to the Wises and Miss Jones, for it was they who had arranged the various hiding-places for the treasure-hunt clues. I deliberately kept Wise and Jones on tenterhooks about this as long as I could. The result was, *clues and hints against someone else were quickly forthcoming.* They chose Paul as victim because he had played into their hands *(a)* by starting the rumour about mustard-gas, and *(b)* by showing to Miss Jones an unseemly interest in initiation ceremonies which could be suggested as a sort of mad-scientist motive for the whole series of outrages.

"Esmeralda Jones was far too intelligent, of course, to lay incriminating clues against any one else. It never pays. But, when the Phyllis Arnold affair developed and seemed to be pointing straight at the management, I fancy Wise panicked a bit and overruled her. It's a nice irony that they should have betrayed themselves so unnecessarily, over the one thing for which they knew they were not responsible. If they'd sat tight for a day longer, Doctor Holford and I would have been forced to give them evidence proving their own innocence in this particular affair: for we knew by then that Miss Arnold's idiosyncrasy for wild parsley had never manifested itself before. But, as Mr. Thistlethwaite so justly pointed out, criminals will not 'leave well alone.' "

"A notable piece of ratiocination, sir," said Mr. Thistlethwaite. "I confess the significance of that point had altogether escaped me. I wonder you did not promulgate it at the tea party."

"It may be convincing for criminologists like yourself. But it was not a good point for a jury. And it was a kind of jury I had to address then. Besides, Wise had already given himself away, so there was no need of it."

The train ripped through a landscape of meadows smooth and rich like golden watered silk, of elms and solid stone farmsteads. Already, to Paul, Wonderland was as remote as a childhood holiday, as fantastic as its own name. Only the touch of Sally's hand on his remained to assure him it had not all been a bad dream. Mr. Thistlethwaite, as if he had eaten a magic mushroom, was already turning back into the tailor of Oxford: the black tail coat, the sponge-bag trousers and butterfly collar which he had again assumed, together with a changed, subtle deference of manner, seemed to play tricks with time, so that the train might have been running backwards into the past, carrying them as it had done a week ago towards an unknown holiday. But then there had only been four occupants of their compartment. Paul turned to Nigel and said:

"I can scarcely believe it was all real. Those practical jokes, the kind of suppressed hysteria plus pleasure-as-usual atmosphere in the camp—well, they were nasty enough at the time, but they look hopelessly far-fetched to me now. I can't seem able to take them seriously."

"You've Esmeralda Jones to thank for that. She's got many admirable qualities; but she was a spoilt child, and spoilt children are apt to grow up irresponsible, and irresponsible adults—by not facing the seriousness of their own actions—do create a dream atmosphere that affects outsiders too. She's a throwback to the Bright Young Things. Nobody else would have thought out so fantastic a method of gaining the objective. Unfortunately, she has an intelligence quite equal to her ambition and her uncontrollable love of mischief, so the campaign became a really formidable one. But Leyman would probably have double-crossed them in the end, anyway. I'm sorry for her."

"I'm not," said Sally. "I'm sorry for Captain Wise, a little. Fancy having that woman treading on your heels all the time. I bet she'd have chucked him aside as soon as she'd got the money. I always said she was a gold-digger."

"Perhaps. But she was genuinely fond of him. As a girl, she had all the power that money can buy. Wise was a relic, a reminder of that kingdom. She bossed him, and by doing so kept an edge on her appetite for power. She——"

Like Alice, the train plunged into a tunnel. The darkness and clattering din stopped all conversation. Paul and Sally may have found another use for it, though.

MINUTE
FOR
MURDER

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The public will be relieved to know that the government department in which the action of this book takes place, never did, or could, exist. I hereby assure my late colleagues, to whom the book is dedicated, that, whereas every disagreeable, incompetent, flagitious or homicidal type in it is a figment of my imagination, all the charming, efficient and noble characters are drawn straight from life.

N.B.

Chapter 1

Open New File

The cleaner rose from her knees, collecting bucket, brush and duster, and creaked toward the door. There, as usual, she turned, beamed, said, "Tata, Mr. Strangeways, be good," before clanking off to do the deputy director. Mrs. Smith had been above herself ever since, two years ago, a popular actor had given a radio talk about a Mrs. Smith, a charwoman with gouty knees and a lion heart, who cleaned her government office while the bombs whistled round her ears, and represented all the indomitable charwomanhood of Great Britain going about its task with a heartbreak in its collective bosom and a racy cockney joke on its lips. Mrs. Smith had taken the tribute as a personal one, treating her government gentlemen thereafter with an easy camaraderie for the higher grades and a certain hauteur for the lower.

Nigel Strangeways, as usual, blew the dust off his desk, and emptied yesterday's cigarette stubs out of the window. It was nine in the morning. He liked to start work early, before the telephone and his colleagues could interrupt. Until ten o'clock the Ministry of Morale would be silent, but for the clankings of the Mrs. Smiths and the furtive scurryings of a few conscientious junior officers not yet affected by the slackening of morale which had set in since V-E day. Nigel drew out a sheet of draft photo captions composed by Brian Ingle.

Swift and inexorable as a sheaf of arrows flung from the hand of Nemesis, he read, *these Spitfires are pranging German rail-traffic concentrations in the Gelsen-kirchen area.*

He altered "pranging" to "attacking." He scribbled in the margin, "Arrows are not flung by hand." He glanced at the photograph to which the caption was keyed and added, "They are Typhoons." Good old Brian, he thought: incurably inaccurate; invincibly romantic; never at a loss for the wrong word, the muddled metaphor—what should we do without him? Poor old Brian, after five years of it still bringing to the labors of caption writing the same luscious and uncritical enthusiasm which before the war had made him the ace novel reviewer of the *Sunday Clarion.* Clever of Jimmy to pick him for the job. But Jimmy *was* clever at picking his staff. That's what made him a first-rate director. "No," he had said firmly at the start, "I don't want advertising men for my division. I want people who believe in what they are saying. We shan't sell this war to the public with our tongues in our cheeks." And how right he was. When Brian Ingle told the public that a squadron of Spitfires (or Typhoons) were a sheaf of arrows flung from the hand of Nemesis, the public believed him, the appropriate response was registered once again: a just war. Nigel took his eraser and rubbed out "Arrows are not flung by hand."

The door opened. A messenger shambled in, his arms heaped with files and letters. As usual, he looked helplessly about him, then moved with the compulsive gait of a sleepwalker to Nigel's desk, placed a selection from his burden in the Out tray and remarked dismally that it was a beautiful morning for the time of year. As usual, Nigel moved the pile of documents from the Out tray to the In tray. Yes, it was a beautiful morning, he agreed, glancing at the rent in the opaque material which the Office of Works had pasted over the window frame when the glass was shattered by a flying bomb.

"We've not seen the half of it yet," said the messenger darkly.

"The half of what?"

"You mark my words, sir. When peace comes, as you might say real peace, there'll be chay-oh in this country. Proper chay-oh."

Nigel translated rapidly to "chaos."

"What makes you think that?" he asked.

"Stands to reason. Millions of young men trained to kill, proper artful too, look at these here commandos and such, unarmed combat my eye, plug 'em in the tripes with a tommy-gun more like—well, they comes back, and what do they find?"

"Chay-oh," replied Nigel involuntarily. "That is to say . . ."

"You said it. Missus gone off with a chap, couple of extra nippers in the house, some embuskay sitting on his fanny in your job—what do you do? Stands to reason. Start shooting. Violence begets violence—see Aldous bleedin' 'Uxley. Millions of 'em. Now after my war," continued the messenger, indicating the 1914-18 ribbons on his dark blue uniform, "it was different. All killed off we was. What come back, we'd 'ad enough; anything for a quiet life. Cowed, that's what we were. You may think it a 'arsh saying of mine, sir, but this war hasn't killed off enough, not on your bleedin' life it ain't. Now take this 'ere demob scheme."

After ten minutes of social analysis, the messenger nodded morosely to Nigel and ambled out, dropping in the doorway a large envelope marked with a red MOST SECRET tab, two files and a pink letter addressed to James Lake, Esq., C.B.E., and giving off an unofficial perfume. Calling back the oblivious messenger, Nigel restored the large envelope and the files to his arms. The letter he decided to deliver himself; it would give him an excuse for a chat with Our Blonde.

Our Blonde, as the director's personal secretary, Nita Prince, was called throughout the length and breadth of the Visual Propaganda Division, represented visual propaganda at its full range and dizziest peak. She combined, as Merrion Squires, the art work specialist put it, the crude appeal of the poster, the mystery of the isotype, the glamour of the glossy studio portrait, the golden mediocrity of Brian Ingle's captions. In the tradition of the Visual Propaganda Division, she concealed high efficiency beneath a studied vagueness, amateurishness, insouciance. When Nigel entered, she was pecking helplessly at an In tray brimming with documents, her bright hair tumbling over her face.

"Hello, Nita."

A tall, smooth-limbed creature, she straightened up from bending over the desk, and gave Nigel the full benefit of her morning make-up.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "Look at this In tray. I sometimes wonder why we go on at all."

"We go on because the British people, having unsheathed the sword, will not lightly sheathe it until, shoulder by shoulder with our gallant allies, we have slashed off the last Hydra-head of the totalitarian aggressor."

"If you ask me, we don't sheathe it because a sword is a damned sight more difficult to sheathe than to unsheathe—you watch 'em trying to do it on the stage. What've you got there?"

Nigel held up the pink, perfumed envelope.

"Another love letter for the boss. Old Kirby dropped it in my room."

Nita Prince's ravishing face gave no hint of emotion, not even that faintest smirk of self-satisfaction which reveals the woman confident in her own power against all competitors. She was reaching out for the letter when the telephone on her desk rang.

"Hello. This is V.P.D. Yes? . . . No, the director is in conference, I'm afraid. I'm his secretary. Can I help you? . . . Oh, Mr. Snaith. Good morning." Nita Prince rolled up her eyes in a look of mute long-suffering at Nigel and, holding the receiver away from her ear, fished in her bag for a cigarette. Nigel lit it. The telephone crackled and gobbled.

"Well," said Nita, when it was silent for a moment, "we're getting on as fast as we can with your folder. We should be able to show you pulls in a fortnight's time." The telephone came back with an atmospheric storm. "Yes, we quite appreciate the urgency. It's too bad your having to wait so long," replied Nita, in a voice like molten honey, "but there was a difficulty over a canned photograph: the censor has not yet released it. . . . What? . . . No, the naval censor. *Your* censor, Mr. Snaith"—Nita put out her tongue at the invisible Mr. Snaith, who was momentarily silenced. The atmospherics started again.

"Oh, that's another matter. You should really speak to the head of the Editorial Unit about that."

Nigel made for the door.

"An incompetent bungler? Oh, come, Mr. Snaith! Perhaps you'd like to have a word with him now; he happens to be in the room. . . . No? . . . Well, I'm afraid the director is very busy today. Let me see"—without referring to her engagement book, Nita reeled off a list of the director's commitments. "Today doesn't seem possible. And tomorrow . . . oh, you can't manage tomorrow? Well, perhaps we'd better leave it then. You can rely on us to fulfill our dates. . . . Yes, it's going very nicely. The wholesalers have taken just over 700,000 copies already, and it's being translated into six, no eight, foreign languages, I believe. . . . Yes, we'll keep you informed. Goodbye, Mr. Snaith."

"The human calculating machine," said Nigel. Then, obscurely feeling the remark to be a shade off-color, "I just don't know how you keep all those statistics at your finger tips."

"Oh, I forget nothing. Born that way."

"What's Snaith fussing about now?"

"That new job in the Pacific series. Silly old hen. These public relations officers ought to be blotted out. And Snaith's the worst of the whole bunch. A flea in your ear on the telephone, and a pinch on the bottom when he pays a personal visit."

"If I was a naval rating in the Pacific," said Nigel dreamily, "I shouldn't want a folder full of pictures of bamboo huts and potted Melanesian history, and how to be tactful with the natives; I should want a folder full of huge great pictures of whopping great pin-up girls. Like yourself."

"You'd better discuss your change of policy with Jimmy, then," replied Nita, smiling faintly. "And I wish you'd go away. Haven't you any work to do? Let's have that letter first."

Nigel flipped it on to her desk. At the door, he turned round. Nita was staring at the letter, where it lay, with a frozen look, as though it were some venomous tropical spider suddenly appeared on her desk. She quite noticeably refrained from touching it. Her fingers were locked rigidly in her lap.

"It won't bite," said Nigel from the door.

Nita Prince started. "Oh, damn you, Nigel! Do get out or come in properly. I can't bear people standing in doorways. . . . Sorry, I'm fussed this morning. That pestilent Snaith."

Oh no, thought Nigel, you've been dealing with Snaiths for nearly six years and not turned a hair. It's the letter. And as you haven't opened the letter, it's the handwriting on the envelope. Someone has written to Jimmy who shouldn't be writing to Jimmy. Someone out of your past life, perhaps? Well, let it go. It's not my business.

But Nigel's inveterate curiosity about other people's lives would not let it go. It was the first time he had seen the ravishing and all-conquering Miss Prince thoroughly shaken. Even during the summer of the previous year, when flying bombs passed as frequently over the Ministry of Morale as a suburban train service, and the top story of the building jerked and swayed with their explosions, she had remained at her desk, taking down minutes, soothing ruffled telephone callers, enclosed in her usual aura of invulnerability. "Any sensitive bomb," Merrion Squires had remarked, "would think twice before making a date with Our Blonde." But Squires, as he was the first to admit, did not believe in blondes, on principle.

Sitting in his own room again, mechanically glancing through a MS entitled *The War Story of Our Four-Legged Friends,* which had been sent to the Minister by an optimistic animal lover with the request that it should be published at the government's expense, fully illustrated ("I have some perfectly sweet snaps of my own doggie, Mopkins, who has been on active service throughout the blitzes, always barking to warn me when the sirens went."), Nigel reflected how little he really knew about his colleagues. From 1940 till a few months ago, they had all been working their heads off—anything from ten to fourteen hours a day—all, that is to say, but Edgar Billson, one of the permanent civil servants on the staff, who knew his rights and departed, bowler hat, umbrella and brief case (empty) sharp at five every evening. But, slogging away like that, year after year, though your fellow sloggers became as familiar as the face of your watch, their private lives, like the works of the watch when it is in perfect running order, were not disclosed. One knew that Merrion Squires disbelieved in blondes; that Brian Ingle had a weak heart; that Edgar Billson lived at Pinner; that Jimmy Lake was married to a nice quiet girl who gave him his head. But, now that the worst was over, such scraps of information were not enough for Nigel's inquiring turn of mind.

For instance, was Nita Prince Jimmy's lover? The division, for the most part, assumed that she was. But Nigel had been much too busy to find out, and too tired to care. And had Brian Ingle, who treated her like the Holy Grail, any conception of the human being she really was? Had Nigel himself, for that matter? And why did Harker Fortescue, normally an uncompromising, rough-tongued man, fail to discipline Merrion Squires, who so often spoke to him disrespectfully in the presence of junior officers? And was Edgar Billson as pompous at home as in the Ministry?

I shall start a new file, said Nigel to himself: a Most Secret file; a dossier on the division. I shall see how much, during the few remaining months I have to stay in government service, I can find out about my colleagues. And I shall put it all down in my Most Secret file. And, the day I go, I shall burn it. It will get my hand into practice again. The hour may yet strike when I shall be dabbling once more in crime. Though God forbid!

At this auspicious moment, Brian Ingle entered the room. A smallish, fattish, fairish man, he gave the impression of always going through life at a trot. He trotted up to Nigel's desk and all but wagged his tail.

"Oh yes, your captions," said Nigel. Ingle's brown eyes began to sparkle with a dotty kind of enthusiasm. "I've suggested one or two alterations. Those aircraft are surely Typhoons? And—"

"Of course, of course," interrupted Brian Ingle breathlessly. "But you like them? On the whole? Up to standard, you think? Not just a leetle too, ah, rhetorical?"

"No, they'll do very well. With the alterations I've suggested," added Nigel firmly.

Brian Ingle, he knew by experience, was in love with his own words. All of them. For ever and ever. He was quite capable of putting them back at final proof stage. It was quite a game between him and Nigel; Nigel had, in fact, invented an elaborate procedure for counterchecking final proofs, largely in order to block this maneuver of Ingle's.

"What amazes me is how you keep it up."

Ingle perched himself on the edge of Nigel's desk.

"Keep it up?"

"Yes. The German war over, and you turn out captions about it still with all the sacred fire of 1940."

"You're pulling my leg, aren't you?"

"No. What I mean is, no one's going to be interested in this D-Day to V-Day production. The subject is dead. The public are sick of stories, photographs, exhibitions, films about the war. We're only going on with the production because the service departments can't fight down their lust for publicity—a lust we ourselves, I admit, were first responsible for provoking in them; or rather, they can't bear the thought of another few hundred tons of paper not being wasted in the good old service way, and —where was I?"

"You'd better not let Jimmy hear you talking like that." Brian giggled. "But seriously, if you mean why do I go on putting my best into this show, when there's nothing but paper in the house—I say, rather an appropriate metaphor, that! . . . Well, I suppose the answer is that I enjoy writing. Writing anything."

Ingle had come out with this last revelation after one of those long, silent pauses for incubation, or self-examination, which contrasted so oddly with his normal brisk and breathless manner. Nigel's heart warmed to the little chap. He decided to become outrageously personal.

"And because, having moved heaven and earth to get into the Armed Forces and been turned down every time on your medical, you thought the next best thing you could do was to work yourself to death here?"

Brian Ingle was petrified for a moment with the Englishman's embarrassment at such intimacies. Then he unexpectedly thawed.

"Oh nonsense. That applies to all of us, anyway. No, the fact is I have all the creative writer's equipment, except creativeness. Curiosity, exuberance, spiritual stamina—the whole paraphernalia. But I can't invent. So I became a crit—a book reviewer. So now I write flaming captions: the photographs supply the invention, the ideas; I just embroider on them."

It would have been Nigel's turn to be embarrassed, if he had been capable of such a reaction. His habit of regarding human behavior with absolute detachment, never coloring it with his own emotions and prejudices, prevented this, however.

"You ought to get married," he pursued.

Another of Ingle's pregnant and interminable silences followed. He seemed to be studying the suggestion, an abstract look in his brown eyes, from every possible angle. Or perhaps he was merely embarrassed again.

" 'Remember thy creator in the days of thy youth'?" he replied at last. "Perhaps you're right. Trouble is, I have rather a high standard that way. Unlike my novel reviewing, the high-brow boys would say," he added with a wry twitch of the mouth.

He seemed to be on the point of further disclosures when the door blew open as though a bomb had exploded in the passage, and Pamela Finlay, Nigel's assistant, rushed in.

"Morning, all! Sorry I'm late, Strangeways. Been at the dentist. Pheugh—what a fug!"

She strode past Nigel, papers fluttering off the desks behind her, so that the long narrow room resembled a permanent way in the wake of an express, and flung open the double window. Standing at the window, she inhaled vigorously and sketched a few deep-breathing exercises. Brian Ingle was trotting about the room, picking up papers.

"I really think I must buy one of those sticks with points on the end that park-tidiers have," Nigel remarked mildly. "I should quite like to be a tidier of parks."

"Here are your Vallombrosa leaves, Miss West Wind," said Brian coyly.

"Vallom—? Oh, the high-brow's at it again. Shelley, huh? T'chah! Well, to work!"

Miss Finlay tore off her coat in a frenzied manner, as though it was the shirt of Nessus, plumped down at her desk and glared at the papers on it.

"Brian and I were discussing marriage," said Nigel. "In our high-brow way."

"Nothing to it," said Miss Finlay decisively.

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. That is, if you're referring to Ingle's prospects. She wouldn't have him. And I may say, Ingle, if you knew what's good for you, you'd thank your stars she won't. It beats me how men—"

But Brian Ingle, coloring deeply, had snatched up his captions and photographs from Nigel's desk and scuttled from the room.

"The tactlessness of women makes my blood run cold," said Nigel presently.

"Oh, bosh! Why can't you men ever look facts in the face?"

Pamela Finlay plunged at the interoffice telephone, and proceeded to conduct one of her celebrated dual-conversation turns.

"Three five nine three. . . . Everyone knows that Our Blonde. . . . Hello. Three five nine three? Bloggs? Mr. Strangeways' assistant speaking. Where are those proofs? The Far East series, number four. . . . is a human limpet, and it's not Ingle she's fastened to. . . . But you promised them yesterday. . . . however much *he* may be stuck on *her*. . . . Come clean, Bloggs! Have the proofreaders started on it yet? . . . What he needs is the mother type. . . . Oh, they've nearly finished? I've heard that one before. . . . not the courtesan. Anyway, Our Blonde is faithful after her fashion. . . . I know you're busy; so are we; the deadline for the printers is the fifteenth. Mr. Strangeways must have those proofs by midday sharp. If necessary, I shall come and fetch them in person."

The threat evidently sufficed. Miss Finlay slammed down the receiver while it still cackled unconditional surrender, and resumed the other branch of her conversation.

". . . after her *fashion*. Which means one man at a time. And that's all it does mean. She was supposed to be engaged to Charles Kennington when he was working here. And the moment *he* left, she was off with Jimmy. I admit she's given him a long run. Maybe he's got under her skin. But it doesn't stop her treating all the rest of you males to that enigmatic, come-hither-if-you-dare look now and then. And you all fall for it. Poor little Ingle. T'chah! The fact is, she can't help it. Give her that."

"Well, well, well," commented Nigel.

"Go on, say it."

"Say what?"

"Say I'm jealous. Of course I am. Any healthy woman would be. The whole of this floor buzzing with eligible males and all of 'em buzzing round Nita. Shocking maldistribution of the basic commodities."

Miss Finlay's boisterous laugh rattled the partition walls, already much shaken by the blast of V-bombs. The usual minatory knocking sounded from the deputy director's room next door.

"Including Fortescue?" asked Nigel.

"Oh, he's a deep one, is old Hark'ee."

"What I was thinking is—how little we all know about each other. Of course, the place has always been full of gossip. But it never meant much; there was no malice in it, no deep curiosity really. We've been working too hard to have strong personal feelings. Or at any rate, we've repressed them, in the interests of making an efficient division and helping to win the war, and because blitzes breed a certain tolerance for one's fellow blitzees. But now everything has slacked off, don't you think all those repressed personal feelings are going to rise to the surface? In fact, haven't they begun to, lately?"

"You mean, the division has been getting bloody-minded?"

"Some of us, wouldn't you say?"

"Let me think."

Miss Finlay was one who commonly suited the action to the word. She knit her brow, buried her large, fresh-complexioned face in her hands, ran her fingers through her frizzy mop of hair.

"I'm trying to remember—of course, it was the Thursday before last. It was my turn for lunchtime duty at the divisional call point. Well, I'd just sat down at the telephone with my knitting, when the D.D. poked his nose through the door and said I could scat—he'd be in his room all lunchtime and would answer any calls. I thought it a bit odd. Hark'ee doesn't usually go out of his way to pamper the lower grades. Well, I nipped back in here, and I footled about a bit; and then, just as I was going over to the canteen, I heard a sort of shindy blowing up in the D.D.'s room. Him and—you'd never imagine who. Give you two guesses."

"General Eisenhower."

Pamela Finlay let out one of her bawls of laughter.

"Don't be an ape! It was that twerp, Billson."

"Hark'ee slanging Billson? Nothing odd about that. We all do. Have to keep the permanents in their place."

"No, what was funny was that Billson seemed to be doing all the talking. You know how correct he is. Deferential attitude to senior officers and all that. Well, he didn't sound at all deferential. Of course I couldn't hear much of what they said, through this wall. But the tone of the voices sounded like blue murder. Billson's especially. I ought to have a blister on my ear still, the way I pressed it to the wall. I did hear Billson say, 'This is the last chance I'll give you.' And a bit later Hark'ee, very coldly, 'You're in a cleft stick, Billson, and you know it,' and then something about 'Go to the dogs, for all I care.' I got the impression that Billson was threatening the D.D. and the D.D. sort of bouncing him off good and hard."

"What fun? Anything else?"

"Just the name Prince. It seemed to crop up quite often."

"Oh Lord! Back to Nita again."

"Yup. And that was all. Except, when I was just toddling off to the canteen, Billson shot out of D.D.'s room and swept past me with such a look on his face as you never saw."

"What sort of a look?"

"Absolutely furious. No, furious isn't quite the word." Pamela Finlay tousled her hair, as though searching in it for the *mot juste.* "Desperate. Like a sheep at bay," she brought out triumphantly. "So what do you make of all that?"

"Simple. Billson discovers the D.D. is having an affair with Nita. Attempts to blackmail him. The D.D. retorts smartly that Billson is in a cleft stick, as he (the D.D.) knows for a fact that he (Billson) has a family of no less than eight illegitimate children by Nita."

The room quaked with the blast of Miss Finlay's laughter. Angry knocking again sounded from the next room. The telephone rang.

"For you," said Miss Finlay.

The voice of Harker Fortescue's secretary said:

"The deputy director presents his compliments, and requests that Mr. Strangeways should buy a silencer and fix it on his assistant. Also, he wants to see you after coffee. Message ends."

Not long afterwards, the rumbling of trolley wheels at the far end of the passage was heard, and a voice dismally wailing "Coffee! Coffee!"

Miss Finlay gathered up two cups and hurled herself out of the door.

Nigel sipped the beverage known in the Ministry of Morale as coffee. It did not improve with the years—an almost colorless liquid which might have been brewed from a compound of acorns, dishcloths and wormwood. Miss Finlay, who cherished a mild, motherly affection for him, was in the habit of slipping two or three lumps of sugar from a private store into his cup; but they did little to palliate the bitter draught.

"What I was thinking of," said Nigel dreamily, "was higher up."

Miss Finlay knitted her brow in an agony of concentration, like a child trying to do a difficult sum in mental arithmetic.

"Yes, higher up still," Nigel pursued. "Jimmy himself is showing signs of wear and tear, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't know. Don't move at such dizzy levels myself."

"Of course, after six years one might expect it. But I don't get the impression that it's just ordinary war-weariness."

Nigel fell silent. He was thinking. Jimmy's got amazing stamina; he kept us all going through the worst of it. He put the machine together and supplied the lubricant—his tact is quite incredible—never makes a wrong move in dealing with his staff—and what a heterogeneous, awkward lot of chaps we are! But lately I feel he's been losing his grip—not losing it, perhaps, but having to drive himself to keep it. Distrait at times. Has to wrench his mind back to the business on hand. Not quite so quick and confident when there's a decision to be made. A bit irritable, and that's the strangest thing of all in a man who's always been so even tempered. Well, maybe it's just reaction after the strain. The war's nearly over; we shall be disbanded in six months' time with any luck, and then he can go back to his old job and take things easy. He's a good chap. I've got really fond of him.

Five minutes later, Nigel went next door to the deputy director. Harker Fortescue, as usual, was telephoning. He flipped a cigarette at Nigel, who plumped down in the luxurious leather armchair intended for the use of only the most distinguished visitors, and patiently waited. He studied more attentively than usual, after Miss Finlay's queer little story, the bald head, the dyspeptically hollowed face, the cold and fishy eye of his immediate superior. The façade was familiar; it told him nothing new today. He had realized long ago that it *was* a façade. Beneath the carefully cultivated, managerial manner, the brusqueness, the impersonal drawl of the voice, at this moment all concentrated upon the discomfiture of whoever it might be at the other end of the line, there was undoubtedly, however much some of the staff might doubt it, a human being.

Nigel had discovered this human being in the course of the bad years, when he and Fortescue had toiled together, night after night, in a dour attempt to keep abreast of the ever-growing work commissioned from the division by other ministries.

Sooner or later, often after midnight, they would repair to the canteen, staggering with weariness, and Nigel would consume a trayful of spam, pickles, bread, buns and blanc-mange, while Fortescue toyed with a glass of milk. It was during these collations of the small hours that Fortescue revealed his secret passion. For years and years, with the zest and maniac pertinacity of a small boy autograph-hunting, he had collected—not autographs, not stamps, not china, not furniture, not matchbox lids or rare moths, but what he called "my feelthy peectures." These were not filthy pictures in the accredited sense of the term. They were snapshots of the great, the famous or the notorious, caught in ill-considered or mercifully oblivious poses—pictures taken for the most part before the advent of that universal leveler, the candid camera. His search for such treasures had taken him all over the world; he attended auction sales and combed old junk shops to buy photograph albums. He possessed an ancient film still showing Tolstoy brusquely rejecting a bouquet offered by his simpering wife; he possessed a snapshot of Landru being arrested; another of Dame Melba taken from behind in the act of driving her opponent's croquet ball into a shrubbery; another of an archbishop, celebrated for his powerful sermons on asceticism, about to stuff his mouth with a huge forkful of caviar. He claimed—and Nigel was not altogether prepared to contest it—that the *clou* of his collection was a snapshot, taken by some icy-nerved aide-de-camp, of Hitler chewing a carpet.

All Harker Fortescue's holidays from the photographic agency, which he ran in peacetime, had been devoted to this eccentric hobby. It was a hobby, thought Nigel now, wonderfully characteristic of the boyishness, the twisted sardonic humor, the streak of fantasy which underlay the deputy director's working façade.

"Yes, I appreciate that," Harker Fortescue was saying. "But it isn't quite the point. If you want to present a complete picture of tank construction, it's essential (a) that you do not attempt to gloss over the mistakes made in 1939-41, and (b) that you give full value to the contributions of the fighting soldier. That is basic." (Basic was a great word of Fortescue's managerial personality) . . . "What's that? . . . I can only say we've been doing this work for six years and we reckon we know something about it." The deputy director's drawl grew more pronounced; his cold eye was fixed, hypnotically glittering, upon the invisible caller. "Of course, if you want a different kind of production, Mr. Walters, if you just want propaganda for your Minister, you can always go direct to the Print Office; I believe they undertake that sort of thing. We don't touch it here, we've a reputation to keep up; the public has got into the habit of expecting to hear the truth from us, within security limits of course, and our policy of giving them the truth pays good long-term dividends, I can assure you."

The deputy director swiveled his chair from east to southeast, a sure sign that the crisis was passing. Nigel thought, not for the first time, that in such telephone conversations Harker resembled a sheep dog, tirelessly coaxing, rounding, driving an obtuse, woolly-minded flock the way he wanted it to go, and occasionally snapping at an errant hoof. He was, indeed, the perfect second string for Jimmy, with his remarkable grasp of detail and his cold pertinacity. Jimmy supplied the originality of approach, the broad outline of policy, the tact. Hark'ee contributed the logic, the ground work and the toughness.

Harker Fortescue gently replaced the receiver. Stroking his bald head, he turned to Nigel.

"That's fixed *him.* You'd better get on with it. Prepare an acceptance sheet for the job. They'll send a synopsis by Monday next. Put Billson on to a preliminary survey of the photographic material. And try and keep the Art Work Unit up to your schedule this time—they're getting slack. You'll have to deal with Walters from now on, but I've broken him in for you."

Fortescue continued to fire off instructions, which Nigel, apparently asleep in the armchair, memorized. Fortescue had long ago given up the effort to make Nigel take notes; indeed, he derived a certain subtle amusement from asking Nigel to repeat, after an arduous conference, some prolix and boring contribution made to it by one of the committee —which Nigel would proceed to do with the unflattering accuracy of a dictaphone.

"Now let's have a look at the project chart," said the deputy director. This was a formidable document, stretching half the length of the wall, and resembling the composite fever chart of a five-hundred-bed hospital as seen by one of the patients *in extremis.*

"Must we?" murmured Nigel.

"What I can never get you to realize," said Fortescue, "is that someone must keep his fingers on all the strings, otherwise we get bottlenecks. It's *your* job, as head of the Editorial Unit. I'm not going to do your work for you."

"Since you mention bottlenecks," returned Nigel mildly, "I must point out that that lamentable object on your wall, useful though it may be to *you* as a warning against delirium tremens, is inaccurate." He strolled over to the chart and stubbed his finger against a purple ink line. "This project received approval at ministerial level on the seventeenth—you've only brought it up to controller level. Slipping, Fortescue, eh?"

The deputy director's mouth twitched amusedly.

"Bring me my purple ink, chump," he said to his secretary. "*And* a pen. *And* a ruler."

Before he could protract the purple line, however, the door opened and Jimmy Lake came in. Tossing a letter on to Fortescue's desk, he gazed out of the window, hands in pockets, his back to them.

"Am I supposed to read this?"

"M'ph," replied the director, without turning round.

Fortescue read through the letter with his usual deliberation. At last he said:

"Ker-rikey! What a story! Stultz! Ker-*ri*key! You remember Charles Kennington, Nigel? This is from him."

"But he's dead."

"Not dead," said Jimmy Lake, still staring out of the window. "Let Nigel read it."

The letter was on pink, perfumed sheets; the handwriting—large, flowing and ornate—the same as that on the pink envelope which had given Nita Prince such a turn earlier in the morning. Nigel began to read.

> My dear,
>
> What quite impossible note paper. The Germans really have *wonderfully* bad taste. Looted, of course. I mean I looted the paper from the Germans. I do *adore* the word "loot," don't you?—so forthright and masculine, and altogether *satisfying.* Well, I've been in the Fatherland for quite a time. Such an unsolid people—when they're not bawling, they're boo-hooing. Boo-hooing like mad, just now. I've been doing one of my female impersonation turns, the upshot of which, after some very vulgar and Boys-Own-Paperish adventures in and around Hamburg, was that we caught Stultz. Yes, I tapped him on the shoulder with my own lily-white hand. *Not* a sympathetic type. Not *at all* my idea of the beautiful blonde Nordic he-man. In fact, I quite took against him from the start. I am told he did some most disobliging things in the concentration camps, but I can't *bear* atrocity stories, so let us pass on. As I say, I tapped this unappealing Stultz on the shoulder, and I must have tapped him a *tiny* bit *hard,* for what did he do but disgorge his little pellet of This-Way-to-Valhalla—yes, spat it out, but literally *spat* it out, so startled he was. Which was a merciful dispensation for your little Charles, as I could not sustain the spectacle of someone dying

of poison at my feet, though they do say cyanide is quick, as such things go. I am sorry to harrow you with sordid and *grating* details, I'm sure your life is quite full enough of them already. What I took up the pen to relate is that I shall be home as quick as quick. I've given this letter to a *devastatingly* charming sergeant, who is just off on leave, and he'll smuggle it out and post it in England. Little Charles will be following hot-foot. Expect to get back on the twentieth. Ring me at Claridge's then. I can't wait to hear all your news. Love to Alice. And Nita, if she is still with you. And all the boys and girls.

Yours affectionately,
Bertha Bodenheim
(alias Charles Kennington.)

"And is he back?" asked Nigel, after perusing this remarkable letter.

"Yes, I've just rung him up," said the director, still staring out of the window. "He's coming along here tomorrow morning."

"We must have a party for him," Harker Fortescue said. "Was it a put-up job when he was posted 'Missing. Believed killed'?"

"Presumably." Jimmy turned round at last. His musing expression broke into a smile. "That letter! Oh my aunt, that letter!" He began to laugh, silently shaking with laughter as his way was. He flung himself into the leather armchair, tears of laughter rolling down his face.

Chapter 2

Action Here

"Ta-ta, Mr. Strangeways. Be good," said Mrs. Smith, clanking out with her bucket and mop.

Nigel opened the window and emptied his ash tray on to the ledge which ran the length of the building at the level of the sixth floor. Below him, in the park, the tired and discolored plane trees were thrashing with a gusty wind that seemed to have been blowing all summer, flinging dust from the rubble of bombed houses in the Londoner's eyes, exasperating the nerves rubbed raw by wartime danger and discomfort.

It was on this ledge, the previous summer, that Merrion Squires had established his eyrie. When the flying-bomb attacks started, a special system of warning was set up in the Ministry. A prolonged note on the buzzer indicated that a clutch of the missiles was approaching this area of London. If any of them was then plotted to be heading for the Ministry, a series of short buzzes sounded. At this signal, the staff occupying the upper floors—particularly those on the south side of the building—had been instructed to make for the emergency staircase on the north side, and go three or four flights down. A few days of this procedure, with the short alarm buzzes sounding at irregular intervals throughout the day, and the division piling themselves down the stairway once or twice every hour, played hell with the work. The bolder spirits took to remaining in their rooms unless the roar of the flying bomb came too near to be ignored.

At this stage Merrion Squires had set up as an independent spotter.

"I do like to be able to see what the doodlebugs are doing," he said.

Accordingly, when a general alarm sounded, he crawled out of his window and sat on the ledge, armed with binoculars and a police whistle. From this point of vantage he would rake the sky: if he judged a flying bomb to be approaching on a course which would take it directly over, or into, the Ministry, he blew his whistle. The division soon found him to be a reliable prognosticator, and his whistle unofficially replaced the alarm buzzes as a signal to scamper for the staircase. Much working time was thus saved, and everyone was happy, Merrion Squires not least; everyone, that is, except the Establishments Division. This division, which concerned itself with personnel and maintenance problems, took an unfavorable view of Squires' activity. They paid official roof-spotters to give official warnings. Merrion Squires, on the other hand, they begged to point out, was receiving salary as a temporary civil servant (grade: specialist) in the Art Work Unit of the Visual Propaganda Division; they begged to inform him, therefore, that should he continue with his supererogatory task, they might find it necessary to deduct from his salary an amount equivalent to the period (or periods) thus daily consumed by him in cessation from his official work in the capacity set out above.

Merrion had instantly launched a spirited counterattack. In a masterly minute to Establishments Division, he computed the total of man-hours saved per diem over an average week by his personal warning system, added to it—somewhat audaciously—the amount of man-hours lost by the official system over the first week of the attacks, and requested overtime payment to himself in respect of the total. Establishments Division, staggered by this unorthodox approach, had never quite succeeded in getting on the offensive again. Indeed, a year later, minutes were still passing desultorily between the antagonists, although an absolute deadlock had long before been reached, and neither side had discovered a formula by which the impasse could be resolved.

Looking out over the park, Nigel could see the mark of the bomb which had put an end to Merrion's ledge-spotting. Not more than 150 yards away, there was a patch of splintered and withered trees. Here one of the last flying bombs to come over London had exploded. They had all heard the distant, gathering roar; heard Merrion's whistle, sounding more urgently than ever before; dashed for the staircase and tumbled down it pell-mell. Then a quivering silence. The bomb had cut out. Then a winged swishing, as if Satan were falling out of heaven. Then a paralyzing blast; another instant of silence, followed by the tinkle of glass, lazily cascading.

When they got back to the sixth floor, they found Merrion Squires lying insensible and covered with blood in his room. His door had been blown off its hinges into the passage; the wall was riddled with daggers of glass; the floor looked like a refuse dump; and Merrion's whistle was still firmly clutched in his hand.

On resuming consciousness, his first shaky words had been: "Establishments Division shall hear of this."

It transpired that he had still been sitting on the ledge when the bomb struck, and its blast had blown him back into his room.

"Why on earth didn't you take cover, you silly gubbins?" Jimmy Lake asked.

"What cover?" replied Merrion, in his indolent Irish drawl.

Afterwards, he confided to Nigel that he had been too frightened to move.

"There was I, your little cherub sitting up aloft. And there was that murderous great thing sailing straight down at me. And first I thought I'd wait a second or two longer to see wouldn't it turn away; and then I thought, well, me boy, it's too late to get back into yer room now—and anyway what's the use? It had me hypnotized. And," he added, "if Ingle sends me in one more caption to mark up about our gallant fighters of the home front staring death in the face, I'll kill him. I mean it, Nigel, I'll do in the little cliché-monger. Me nerves won't stand it."

Nigel closed the window and went back to his desk, ruminating on the bizarre exposures of war. A bomb tore away the side of a house and revealed a vertical series of lavatory bowls hanging on the edge of an abyss. It tore away the façade of a human being, and you got a view of the psychological plumbing, but only for a moment; the wall was soon up again, the interior tidied. Tidied, but the structure warped, perhaps dangerously and invisibly weakened. Or sometimes, for all one knew, strengthened. If you found you had stood up to the ordeal, the discovery gave self-confidence. That, no doubt, as one could learn from primitive tribes, is what ordeals are for.

From Merrion Squires, Nigel's mind strayed to that other and more improbable hero, Charles Kennington. It was pleasant to reflect how many of his sort the war had thrown up. The long-haired, sensitive types, who had voted at the Oxford Union that under no circumstances would they die for king and country, and a few years later had gone up into the air with the professionals of the R.A.F. and helped to win the Battle of Britain, fighting with the same skill and abandon as once they had speechified. The conscientious objectors, who refused to kill but performed prodigies of valor during the blitzes as members of rescue squads and fire brigades. The clever little dons, who vanished one day from their universities and were next heard of having dropped by parachute into occupied territory, organizing the resistance, dynamiting bridges, standing up to a firing party in a squalid backyard. The anonymous-looking scientists, who walked up to unexploded bombs and coldly took them to pieces, as though they were demonstrating an experiment in a laboratory, and generally were not blown to bits. All the eccentrics, the amateurs, the people who did not believe in war and went into a cold fury when it interfered with their private lives and were then extremely dangerous to anything that got in their way, whether it was a German or a piece of red tape. The people who proved so much the more disconcerting to the enemy because they did not wear their toughness on their sleeve, and because their minds would keep jumping the rails so earnestly laid down for them by Teutonic students of the English character. It was the streak of fantasy in it that gave this character its charm, and also gave it the unpredictability so formidable to a logical foe, Nigel reflected.

Charles Kennington was a fair representative. A young man of engaging though effeminate appearance, he had been a society photographer before the war. His clientele, whom he bullied and insulted in a way they all agreed was devastatingly chic, would simply not have believed that, when he disappeared from their ken for a fortnight every summer, it was to attend a territorial army camp.

In September, 1939, he disappeared for quite a bit longer, to turn up again in his old haunts, after Dunkerque, with his arm in a sling, and a military cross on his tunic. He had, in fact, been more severely wounded and more outstandingly brave than either of these decorations indicated. Jimmy Lake, who was his brother-in-law, approached the War Office and got him seconded to the Ministry of Morale as one of the military censors. It was then that Nigel had first met him, for Kennington dealt with the censorship of photographic material and was therefore in constant touch with Nigel's division. Charles Kennington had, indeed, contributed a good deal to the character of the division, Nigel realized now—its flavor of gaiety, insouciance, unorthodoxy. From the start, he had been a problem to the permanent civil servants in the Ministry, through his habit of dating minutes by the liturgical calendar of the Church of England. Edgar Billson, who was senior officer in the Photographs Library, and managed its financial affairs, was particularly harassed by this idiosyncrasy. On receiving a minute headed "Third Day before the Feast of St. Petronella, Virgin and Martyr," he had made a *démarche* in person, only to be met by the shocked remonstrance from Charles Kennington, "But, my dear, are you not a Christian?"

A year later, Kennington had a Medical Board and returned to active service. Jimmy Lake heard from him at long intervals, until the day when he was posted as "Missing. Believed killed" during the fighting on the Rhine. And now he had popped up again, having by his own account captured Stultz, the number three Nazi leader whom the Allies had been hunting for two months. It was all very satisfactorily in the English tradition, thought Nigel; all very satisfactory, except for Nita Prince, who had evidently not been too well pleased by a message from the dead.

The door opened. "What's this?" asked Merrion Squires disgustedly. "Thinking again?"

"Yes, I was thinking," said Nigel, removing his feet from the chair on which they rested, and pushing it towards his visitor. "I was thinking about Charles Kennington as a matter of fact. And yourself."

"Sweet of you. What's the connection? I never met him. Before my time."

"Eccentricity. Queerness. The fantasy strain in the English character."

"If you're suggesting that I'm either an Englishman or a queer—" Merrion Squires exploded angrily, his long clown's face resting on the back of the chair, which he sat astride like a child playing at horses.

"Oh no. You're just a West Britisher with an artistic temperament."

This double-barreled insult failed to get the usual response from Squires.

"I say, talking of temperament, what's up with Our Blonde?"

"You tell *me."*

"Did y'ever see that girl in a flutter before? Y'didn't. Because she's not the sort that flutters. She just stays, all serene, like a damned great carnivorous orchid with its mouth wide open and you all queue up to fly into it."

"I don't think much of your botany."

"Damn my botany!" snapped Merrion. "I know about women, I tell you. Well, I had to go and see Jimmy yesterday evening, and just as I was outside the door, I heard her say, 'It's too late to back out now. You can't do it. Everyone knows, or guesses. There's no use trying to pretend you're not in love with me.' At that point, I barged in. Our director and Our Blonde were in the state of having been contiguous. Jimmy was cool enough, I must say. You know, staring out of the window, hands in pockets. 'Well, Merrion, what do you want?'—the usual act. But Nita"—a note of relish crept into Squires' voice—"Nita was in a state. Positively flushed, positively trembling, just as if she was a real woman. So Jimmy and I got down to work. And Nita started on her typewriter. Believe it or not, my boy, she had to tear up two drafts of what she was typing. Did y'ever know that girl make a mistake before? Y'didn't. Well, then?"

"I suppose she's a bit fussed about Charles Kennington coming back," said Nigel slowly. "They say she was engaged to him while he was here."

Merrion Squires snapped his fingers dramatically. "Y've got it! I didn't know about that. She's afraid Kennington will find out about her and Jimmy. That's why she said it was no use his pretending not to be in love with her; Kennington'd be bound to hear about it sooner or later, since it's an open secret here. Well, if this doesn't beat the band!"

"And why are you so hellishly pleased, may I ask?"

Merrion Squires gave Nigel one of his glancing looks, half impish, half furtive.

"Oh, I like to see orchids being ruffled. Nothing personal, y'know. Just an abstract love of justice. Now that explains something else," he pursued. "When we'd finished our work, Jimmy showed me Kennington's letter, and told me he expected him along this morning; asked me to pop in at coffeetime if I'd like to meet him; half the division going to be there apparently; see the conquering-hero-come stuff; wonder if Jimmy's hired a brass band—mightn't go down well with Establishments. Well, the Blonde gave him a look and said she thought Kennington would hate a fuss to be made of him, and she herself proposed to take a half day off. And Jimmy—you know how suave and patient his voice sounds when he's up against tough opposition—Jimmy just said he couldn't let her off this morning, had got a conference at midday she must steno, and anyway didn't she want to see exhibit number one."

"What's that?"

"This fella Kennington is apparently bringing along a phial of poison he took off the Nazi fella. Just to titivate our ghoulish curiosity. But, don't you see, Nita is afraid of Kennington seeing her with Jimmy at all, even in a crowd; afraid their faces will give them away."

"What an unwholesome imagination you have, to be sure," said Nigel. "I've never heard such a farrago of guesswork. Why on earth should Nita be so upset? Kennington was supposed to be dead. She'd a perfect right to take up with—"

"Oh, you're hopeless. The fact is that Nita *is* upset—she's more than upset, she's frantic. And if you have a better theory—"

What better theory Nigel might have produced was forestalled by a knock at the door. They both groaned. Edgar Billson was the only person in the division who ever knocked on a door before entering.

Edgar Billson crossed the room, as usual, in an unwelcoming silence, the toes in the elastic-sided boots pointing outwards, his eyes fixed upon the floor as if he could not recognize Nigel's existence till he had come within the official orbit of his desk. Having made the regulation approach, he looked up.

"Good morning, Strangeways."

"Good morning."

"I have a complaint to make. But perhaps you are busy?" Billson's watery eyes swam halfway toward Merrion Squires, then turned back.

"I'm sorry to hear that. Do sit down, won't you?" Then, as his visitor looked stiffly around, markedly ignoring the chair on which Merrion Squires still sat astride, Nigel added, "Take Miss Finlay's."

"Your assistant is away today?"

"No, she's not turned up yet."

"Certain sections of the staff are getting very slack," said Billson, placing Miss Finlay's chair at the regulation distance from Nigel's desk and sitting down.

"So I am told," said Nigel blandly. "Are you having a lot of trouble with your section?"

"To the contrary. The attendance figures in the Photographs Library are exemplary."

"I'm delighted to hear it."

"I noticed Miss Finlay leaving the building at four fifty-two yesterday."

"Do you wish to lodge an official complaint about my assistant?"

"No—er, that is, no. Not at this present moment." Edgar Billson shot his starched cuffs and glanced uneasily at Merrion Squires, who was staring fixedly at him over the back of his chair, with the ruminative look of a horse gazing over the half door of a box stall.

"No, it was about these pink forms of yours. I can't work them, if the production units persist in filling them in in such a slovenly manner."

"Wouldn't it be better to discuss this with the deputy director? The pink form was his invention."

"Mr. Fortescue has asked me to discuss the matter with you."

"What's the trouble, then?"

Edgar Billson laid a sheaf of forms on Nigel's desk. He coughed. "The purpose of the pink form—"

"Is to captivate the masculine eye. Natural selection," Squires broke in irresponsibly.

"Shut up, Merrion," said Nigel.

"The purpose of the pink form," continued Billson relentlessly, "is to facilitate and co-ordinate the ordering of photostats and rough prints by the production units at the preliminary stages of—h'rrm—production."

"Yes, I know that," Nigel said. It was one of Billson's most tiresome traits, this lecturing you on the elements of work which you knew backward.

"If you will examine these examples, you will note that the appropriate procedure has not been followed. Dates are missing; entries are sometimes illegible; the quality of print required is not always stipulated."

"I see one date missing. Only one," returned Nigel, glancing rapidly over the forms.

"Furthermore, the ordering of rough prints and photostats appears to me far in excess of reasonable requirements. Why, for instance, should your unit have requested six copies of print QW5339? Three at the most would suffice."

"It's to expedite the work on one of our rush jobs. The QW series, you may remember, is a file of canned photographs. We wish to use one of them. To do so, it's necessary to resubmit it to three security censors—naval, military and air. Three separate copies to speed things up. The remaining three are for our own use."

Edgar Billson had been growing red in the face during this measured reply. He now broke out, with unusual violence.

"The trouble with you temporaries is that you have no grasp of civil service traditions. Speed is not everything in our work, Strangeways."

"You surprise me," put in Merrion Squires.

"There is also the broader question of the public economy. I am answerable to the Treasury for all sectional expenditure under the Ministry's appropriation. I am not prepared to squander public funds in this irresponsible way, on your pretext of accelerating the work of the division."

"You'd better talk to the director about it, then, if you want to dispute his rulings on divisional policy," replied Nigel calmly.

"I fail to understand you. To what ruling do you refer?"

"The general ruling, given by him at a progress meeting in May, 1940, to all heads of sections, that under no circumstances must red tape or any other form of official obstructionism be allowed to interfere with the smooth and rapid work of the division."

"Are you suggesting that—?"

"I'm suggesting that my unit needs six copies of QW5339. And that, whenever we need six copies of a photograph, we shall continue to order them. And that I am tired of being lectured by you on my official obligations. And that, if you ever again use the word 'irresponsible' in reference to my work, I shall ask the director to take disciplinary action against you." Nigel paused a moment. "If you will leave these forms with me, I'll look into them."

Edgar Billson gave him one vicious look, then rose and made for the door. His would-be dignified exit was spoiled, however, by the whirlwind entrance of Pamela Finlay, which knocked him back several feet into the room.

"I must say you've got the jargon all right," said Merrion, when Billson had finally retired. "I've never known that little rabbit bare his teeth so aggressively, though. Have you? Anyone would think the Q files were his personal collection of pornographic studies, he's so touchy about them. . . ."

* * *

Twenty minutes later, the director sent for Nigel. Nigel found him sitting on the edge of his desk, his long legs dangling, a large part of the floor in front of him covered with photographs arranged in groups. Jimmy Lake flipped a hand at Nigel, then resumed his trancelike brooding over the photographs. They were the proposed double spreads for one of the Pacific series jobs. From time to time the director referred to one of Merrion Squires' layout sheets, hoisted himself off his desk, altered the relative positions of some of the pictures or substituted different ones from a pile that lay on the window sill, then returned to his contemplative pose. It was like a slow-motion game of patience, thought Nigel, played with twelve-by-ten-inch prints instead of cards. He offered this fancy to the director.

"Yes," Jimmy Lake replied. "I find it very soothing to the nerves."

There was another long silence. Nigel was quite accustomed to these silences, though this morning the director seemed more than usually distrait. At last Jimmy spoke.

"No, it won't do. It's dead." He pointed at one of the groups. "That one. Tell me what's wrong with it."

It was rather like being asked by Menuhin to explain a flaw in a passage of virtuoso playing by Szigeti, for Merrion Squires' technical brilliance in layout was excelled only by the director's extraordinary flair for the visual presentation of stories and ideas. However, Nigel took a try at it.

"This is the key picture," he said pointing. "It ought to be given more value. Make a three-quarters spread of it, and use the others in a vertical strip on the righthand page."

The director smiled faintly.

"Pooh!" he said. "Why isn't Merrion here, ducky?"

Nita Prince said, "I've rung him once."

"Ring him again, then."

Nigel noticed a crumpled ball of a handkerchief on Nita's table, and there were shadows under her eyes. Her voice, when she asked for the number, sounded a bit out of control, as if she were very tired.

"Merrion Squires I want," said Jimmy patiently. "That's Brian Ingle's extension you asked for."

"Sorry." Nita tried again. It was odd, thought Nigel. Whatever one might say of her private life, the girl had always kept her mind on her work in the office. And the look she had given Jimmy was rather odd, too: a look of—reproach? Determination? Sulkiness? Uncertainty?—Nigel found himself unable to define it. It was, at any rate, very different from her normal look of confidence, of discreet possessiveness, of a happy secret shared—more naked, more vulnerable.

When Merrion arrived, they got down to the photographs again. The faulty spread was pointed out to him.

"No, it's poor, that one," he agreed. "I was waiting for the Q prints to turn up; there's a much better picture amongst them, I know."

The director lifted his eyebrows interrogatively at Nigel.

"I'm having trouble with Billson over them." Nigel explained the situation as noncommittally as he could; he had no wish to get Billson into trouble.

"Ring up Billson, ducky," said the director. "Tell him we must have the prints from the QW series in twenty-four hours. Tell him I say so."

"He's always sitting on those Q files," said Merrion. "He'll hatch them out one day."

"You forget Billson a moment and concentrate on your job, my son. These layouts of yours—" Jimmy held them up distastefully—"they're second-rate." "Second-rate" was the most offensive term of criticism the director ever used, and he used it very sparingly. Nigel was startled by the rasp that had suddenly come into his quiet voice. So, evidently, was Merrion.

"Maybe I've outlived my usefulness in the division," he replied, only half humorously.

"You'll be told when you have—don't worry," said Jimmy, looking at Merrion directly.

Another queer little unsheathing of the claws concealed in his velvet manner, thought Nigel.

"You must take them away—this one and this one—and try again. I've asked you to alter them before. Now I'm telling you to alter them."

"And I told you your suggestions for improving them were no good." Merrion's Irish temperament took criticism hard, and Jimmy normally treated it in a more tactful way. "I can't adapt my technique to the brain waves of amateurs."

"Amateurs" was, if possible, an even more offensive term in the division than "second-rate."

"I think you had better control your language," said Jimmy in his deadliest quiet tone. "You are one of a number of experts working here. You are not omniscient. You are not even cleverer than the rest. And you have given more trouble recently than the whole lot. The deputy director tells me—"

"Oh, must we have all this now?" exclaimed Nita in a trembling voice. "I'm sure Merrion—"

"I can do without *your* sympathy, my lollipop," said Merrion furiously.

Nigel expected an outburst from the director at this. But Jimmy Lake turned away to the window, as if detaching himself from the whole affair and leaving the other two to fight it out between them. It had the effect, whether intended or not, of deflating the scene. After a moment, Nita said, trying to smile:

"Jimmy is practicing being hardhearted. But it doesn't work. Does it, Jimmy?"

Nigel was to remember afterwards the tone in which she said it. A tone whose undertones were curiously arresting, yet impossible to interpret. At any rate, Nigel could not begin to interpret them now; for the door was flung open and a small, lively-looking man in officer's uniform stood there, hands clasped dramatically over his heart, surveying them with an expression of the most theatrical astonishment.

"My *angels!*" this apparition exclaimed, in a high, light voice. "Jimmy! More distinguished-looking than ever! And Nigel! And another handsome young gentleman! And *Nita!* You sumptuous girl!"

He swooped down upon her like a pantomime fairy on a wire, and demonstratively embraced her. Behind him a small, sedate woman entered the room, rather shyly. Jimmy Lake, who was watching with an amused expression the scene at Nita's desk, did not notice this newcomer till she touched his elbow. Then he swung round.

"My dear girl! What are *you* doing here?"

There was something like consternation in his voice, thought Nigel. And no wonder—Alice Lake had never been encouraged to come to the office, not with Nita Prince there.

"Charles brought me," she said. Her voice had the same high, light timbre as Charles Kennington's—a doll-like quality. Nigel realized he had quite forgotten they were twins. Seeing them together now for the first time, while Jimmy was introducing Merrion Squires to them, he had leisure to observe their likeness—the tone of voice, the triangular-shaped face with broad brow and pointed chin, the small delicate bones. Only Charles seemed to have taken all the vitality; his sister looked flat beside him, a shadow of himself, pleasantly smiling but silent and withdrawn.

"Yes, I brought her," bubbled Charles. "Alice and I are inseparable. Aren't we, love? We intend never, never to part again." He beamed at his sister from where he sat, perched on Nita's desk, his arm lying lightly round Nita's shoulders.

Nigel thought there was a certain atmosphere of constraint, if not of embarrassment, in the room, during the momentary silence that followed. The director, hands in pockets, half turned away from there, was standing by the window. If he felt some awkwardness in his wife's presence there, he was making no attempt to smooth it over with his usual light touch for awkward situations. Everyone else suddenly started talking all at once.

"Nice to see you again," Merrion Squires said to Mrs. Lake. "I thought your last novel was excellent."

"You do look different in uniform," said Nita, turning her lustrous eyes up to Charles Kennington.

"Now, my dears," bubbled Charles, "I must hear all your news. How long is it?—It seems years since I saw any of you. I feel quite out of touch with the world of affairs, the world where men are ciphers, and women are—women." He kissed Nita lightly on the brow. "Put me in the picture," he demanded.

Nita said, "Oh, we've just been slogging away, while you were getting killed and coming to life again and having a gorgeous time looting in Germany."

"Not killed, dear," said Charles severely. "The rest is correct, including the coming to life again. But I was never killed, I give you my word."

"What a lot of ribbons you have!" said Nita, touching the breast of his military uniform. "There was only one there when I saw you last. Have you been very brave, darling?"

"Quite intrepid, my pet. I have probably faced more forms in triplicate than any man in the British Army."

"You and Merrion must get together," said Jimmy Lake dryly. "He's another hero."

"A hero!" Charles Kennington stretched his clasped hands dramatically towards Squires. "You must tell me *all* about it."

"He saved us all from a bomb," Jimmy said.

Charles Kennington shuddered delicately. "Don't speak to me of bombs. I could not dislike them more. Particularly Anglo-American bombs. They kept dropping them on me when I was in Germany."

"Very inaccurate bombing practice," said Jimmy.

"Well, no. Not exactly. You see, I was rather far in advance of the troops, some of the time."

"A spy? Charles! Is that why you were supposed to be dead?" cried Nita.

She was almost beside herself. Nigel had never seen her so flushed and excited. Her mane of bright hair tumbled over Charles Kennington's hand as she talked to him. But there was something conscious in the way she played up to him; as though, Nigel thought first, it was really directed towards somebody else—directed, perhaps, at Jimmy Lake. Then he thought, no, it's just the slight overacting of a clever woman who must appear all sweetness to her long-lost fiancé, and is at the same time conscious of her new lover—in a conspiracy with him, perhaps, to defer the moment when Charles Kennington must be told the truth.

Nita Prince, flushed, melting, a Danaë in a golden shower, certainly held the stage now. Even Merrion Squires kept glancing round at her as he talked with Mrs. Lake in a far corner. Only Alice Lake seemed out of the picture, as she sat there with eyes downcast upon the hands loosely clasped in her lap.

"My dear old colleague, the archdeacon!" intoned Charles, as Harker Fortescue came in, with Brian Ingle behind him. "How are the offertories keeping up? Ember days bearing fruit an hundredfold, I trust? And Brian, lovely to see you. Well, this *is* like old times. But stay!" He lifted a pastoral forefinger in the air. "One of the clergy is missing, surely. Where is the Reverend Billson? Not taken from our midst, I hope?"

"You *can't* want to see him, Charles," said Nita, laughing.

"My love, in the sight of God we are all equal. Pray send at once for our fellow worker in the vineyard."

Nita applied herself to the telephone.

"We've got to congratulate you, Charles," said the deputy director. "A first-class job. Saw about it in the papers, of course, but they didn't mention you by name. 'Young English Major Captures Number Three Nazi.' Absolutely first class."

"I shall treasure up your words, dear archdeacon."

"I hope you're going to tell us all about it," said Brian Ingle. "Were you—I mean, did you work alone in Germany? It must be frightfully n-nerve-racking, a job like that," he added wistfully. "I do admire people n-no end who—"

"Just about as nerve-racking as sitting at a desk here when the V-bombs were falling, I should think," replied Charles with a very sweet and winning smile, his affectations put aside for a moment. Nigel noticed the same smile appearing, like a reflection, on Alice Lake's face. Brian Ingle flushed, unconsciously straightening his shoulders.

"Oh, that's n-nonsense, Charles," he said happily.

"I'll certainly tell you the tale. Not that it's madly stimulating," said Charles Kennington, with a return to his normal manner. "Social realism at its drabbest, my dears. Hello! If it isn't Edgar! And not a day older!"

Charles was the only person in the Ministry of Morale who had ever called Mr. Billson by his Christian name.

Edgar Billson moved across the room, picking his way with pigeontoed gait among the photographs which still littered the floor. Having reached Charles, he raised his eyes for the first time, coughed, extended a large white hand, and said:

"Very pleased to see you again, Major. Permit me to offer my congratulations on your daring coup. H'rrm. Quite a gathering for you," he added on a faintly censorious note, as though it had just occurred to him that the Treasury might not sanction the present expenditure of divisional time on social entertainment.

"Yes, too delicious, isn't it? If only I had my camera! What a charming, informal group you would all make. Or I could arrange you—let me see—yes, like one of those Victorian intellectual picnic groups. You know—littered all over a mountainside. The Higher Thought amongst the boulders. The gentlemen couched full length upon sphagnum moss, gazing in every direction at Progress; the ladies being strenuous with luncheon baskets and volumes of verse. And"—he clapped his hands delightedly as the cry of "Coffee" wailed from the end of the corridor—"and here comes the picnic! Beautiful, nourishing coffee!"

Nita went out with an array of cups on a tray. Merrion Squires, who had been unwontedly silent—the center of the stage for him or nothing, thought Nigel—said:

"Well, where's this bloodcurdling exhibit we've been promised?"

"To be sure. I'd quite forgotten. Delighted you share my naughty passion for sensationalism." Major Kennington fumbled in the large pockets of his tunic, bringing out in turn a ball of string, a manicure set, a Bible, a bag of toffee, some revolver bullets and a matchbox. "Ah, here we are." Opening the matchbox he took out a thin, cylindrical object, about the length of his thumbnail, rather like a lighter-fuel container on a miniature scale. He held it up gingerly between thumb and forefinger.

"The idea was to lodge it between your back teeth, when a state of emergency declared itself. Then, if one of the armed thugs of the pluto-democracies laid hands on you—well, just a little wriggle with the tongue, and a sharp crunch, and the gates of Valhalla opened to you."

The little group in the room had broken up, and reformed around Charles Kennington.

"You mean, it's not soluble?" asked Jimmy Lake.

"No. Different from our type. But be careful how you handle it. The case is madly fragile. And the contents—well!" Charles rolled up his eyes.

"What? Cyanide of potassium?" Harker Fortescue asked.

"Pure hydrocyanic acid."

"Ker-rikey," said Harker.

At this moment Nita came in with her trayful of cups, and the group broke up again, Jimmy and Brian Ingle moving to help her. The others were passing the little container from hand to hand.

"Come and get it," said Nita. The tray was now on the director's desk.

"Mind my photographs," said Jimmy. "Sorry, we ought to have cleared them off the floor. Nita, would you—"

"Certainly not," said Kennington. "I can never resist photographs. Oh, goody, what a treat! What are they for?"

Jimmy Lake told him. "Merrion and I were just quarreling about those two spreads," he added with a pleasant smile at his subordinate. Merrion acknowledged it, a little stiffly.

They had all gravitated now towards the end of the room where Jimmy's big desk was. Some held their cups of coffee, others put them down on the desk beside them.

"Wait a minute, though. You must see Merrion's cover designs for this job. One of them is first class." The director seemed intent on conciliating Merrion Squires. He opened a drawer and took out the designs. Then he was moving across to the bookcase on the left of Nita's table, his hand lightly holding the girl's elbow. "Come and help me put them up."

When they had propped the designs upright against the books, he took her elbow again and moved aside with her so that they could all get a clear view.

"Now, Charles, which do you like best? Harker and I are at loggerheads about them."

It was the director's normal practice, when alternative cover roughs had been prepared, thus to take the opinions of his staff upon them. His staff, on the other hand, knew that his own decision had been made already, and they must be prepared to justify their choice with a wealth of critical judgment, if they wanted him to change his mind. They all scrutinized the designs in silence for a little, shifting about to get a good view of them. At last Charles Kennington said,

"I think *that* one. The bloodthirsty type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas."

The director glanced towards the deputy director, whistling softly between his teeth. Charles had evidently chosen aright.

"Nah," said the deputy director. "It's too literary." He paused, to summon up a still more offensive word. "Too refined. Put it beside one of Clegg's covers, and it'll disappear."

"Harker's idea of a cover design is a toothpaste advertisement poster," Merrion Squires put in, not best pleased at the reference to his chief rival designer.

"I say you've got to hit them in the eye straight away, or you're sunk," declared the deputy director stubbornly.

The telephone bell on Nita's desk rang. She moved from Jimmy's side to pick up her coffee cup from his desk before answering the call. "Damn that telephone!" she exclaimed. "Which is mine?"

"This one, isn't it?" said Brian Ingle, indicating one of the two coffee cups nearest her hand.

"No, that's Mr. Lake's. This is mine." She took it up, went over to her desk and began to answer the call. Jimmy followed her, taking his own cup. Sitting on the edge of Nita's desk, his long legs dangling, he indicated the deputy director's choice with his free hand.

"Look at this design, Harker. Take it easy, relax and just *look* at it. It's pitiable, the way you fall for the obvious. This design is dead at birth, it's stillborn, it's an abortion. Here have I been nearly six years trying to educate you in visual values, and you have the nerve to tell me that this—this crudely colored platitude—is a cover design. T'chah." Jimmy took a gulp of his coffee.

The deputy director's mouth twitched. "There's only one principle for a cover design for our public. They *must* be obvious, they *must* be crude. That one"—he jerked his finger towards the director's choice and poised himself for a knockout blow—"is a good design, I admit; a good design for the dust jacket of a volume of Bloomsbury belles-lettres."

Alice Lake giggled. " 'The bloodthirsty type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas'? Poor old Bloomsbury!"

"The trouble with you, Harker," began Jimmy Lake, but he got no further with it. Nita Prince suddenly interrupted him with a paroxysm of coughing.

"Cough it up, ducky," he said, leaning across and patting her on the shoulders.

Nita Prince did not cough it up, though. The coughing at once turned to a painful choking; the beautiful face was distorted; the eyes desperately stared; Nita's hands clutched and tore at her throat, then jerked feebly in the air before her. They were all staring at her incredulously. Before anyone could move, she had fallen forward across her desk. An ink bottle overturned, rolled slowly off the desk onto the floor, dabbling her bright hair with ink as it went.

Chapter 3

Passed to Mr. Strangeways

Trying to recollect the scene in tranquillity later, Nigel Strangeways found it curiously difficult to piece together. It was as if a bomb had exploded into the middle of the morning, blowing it into grotesque and unrelated fragments. There was the thin, doll-like cry from Alice Lake, "Oh, Jimmy!" There was the director, staring down at Nita in consternation and muttering over and over again, "Nita, what is it? Nita, what is it?" There was Edgar Billson, taking off his glasses and rubbing them on his sleeve and putting them on again, as though he couldn't believe what he had seen through them. There was Merrion Squires, shivering uncontrollably. There was Harker Fortescue, rigid as a statue in the middle of the room. There was Brian Ingle, the first of them all to move, running across the room, throwing open the window by Nita's desk with a cry of "Give her air!" Then standing protectively over Nita's body as though he could still guard her from what had happened. And there was Charles Kennington, on whose face, before he clapped his hands over it, Nigel had caught an extraordinary expression—a look, he could have sworn, of blind, frantic amazement.

Nigel strode across the room. There were only three things to be done, for the moment. He did them, while the others watched him like sheep. He felt Nita's heart, turned up her eyelids. She was dead. He sniffed at her lips and her coffee cup: yes, she had been killed by cyanide; he laid the bright head gently back on the desk. He dialed Scotland Yard and asked for Superintendent Blount.

"Blount? Thank God you're in. Strangeways here. At the Ministry of Morale. Can you come at once? We've had a death by cyanide poisoning. What's that? . . . Oh, damn your etiquette. Hold on a minute—" Nigel had suddenly thought of a fourth thing to be done. Laying the receiver on the desk, he bent down and sniffed Nita's hands and fingers. "Are you there? It's almost certainly murder. . . . You will? Good. And will you pick up a doctor on the way? It'll be quicker than trying to get one by telephone. Room F29 of the Ministry. . . . Yes, I'll see to that. 'Bye."

A murmur, absurdly stagy, had arisen when he used the word murder, as though they were a crowd of extras in a film registering the appropriate response.

"What the devil do you mean, Nigel?" said Harker Fortescue now in a rasping voice.

And Jimmy Lake, vaguely and sadly, "No, Nigel, you must be wrong."

Brian Ingle, who had been standing away, made a desperate little rush at the body, sobbing as if he was in the last few yards of a close race, and Nigel had to fend him gently off.

"I'm sorry," he said, "but no one must touch her now. And no one must leave the room till the police come." He turned to the director. "Forgive me taking charge like this, but I've had this sort of thing before. Superintendent Blount is an old friend of mine. Shall we all sit down?"

"What makes you say it's murder?" asked Major Kennington.

"Her coffee cup smells of cyanide. Her fingers don't. If she had taken the poison by putting that trophy of yours straight into her mouth, the coffee cup wouldn't smell. If she had broken the container into her coffee, her fingers would almost certainly have picked up a smell of the stuff. But there's no smell of cyanide on them. So—" Nigel shrugged.

Major Kennington seemed about to speak, to make some sort of protest. Then he too shrugged his shoulders. Then he did speak.

"Who had Stultz' thing last?" he snapped, turning upon the group huddled round the director's desk.

"This is intolerable," said Edgar Billson. "I do not accept Mr. Strangeways' authority."

"You will accept mine, then," said the director with patient firmness, "and stay in this room. There is no need to answer questions, if you don't wish to, before the police come."

Harker Fortescue said: "She might have put the thing in her mouth and taken a gulp of coffee to wash it down, Nigel. And a little of the stuff might have got into the coffee cup like that."

"It's just a faint possibility," Nigel replied. "That's why I told Blount it was *almost* certainly murder."

"Why are we all talking like this?" It was Alice Lake's high, tiny voice. "That poor girl was alive just now, and now she's dead."

Jimmy walked over to his wife, an intense, appealing expression on his face, and took her hand.

Presently Charles Kennington said, "Nigel, I know I'm very dimwitted. But is the thing in her cup? I mean, if it isn't, I suppose—" his voice trailed feebly away to nothing.

Nigel poked about in the cup, which was a quarter full. Then he turned, shaking his head silently at Kennington. The director, moving restlessly about the room again, hands in pockets, had come near to an open window. At one and the same instant, Charles Kennington was beside his shoulder like a shadow, and Nigel said sharply, "No! Sorry, Jimmy, but I don't think *anyone* had better go near the windows just now."

"Afraid the murderer is going to hurl himself out?" sneered Merrion Squires. "Best thing he could do, I should think."

In the shocked silence, Nigel said, "It's not that. It's Stultz' thing"—they were getting into the habit of calling it that, not "Charles' thing"—it seemed more tactful. "You see, it's not soluble, and it's not in Nita's cup. So if someone did pour the poison into the cup, he's either tucked the container away somewhere in the room, or he's still got it on him. And if so, he *might* try to flip it out of a window when no one was looking. We shall all have to be searched, of course."

"This is preposterous," muttered Edgar Billson angrily.

The telephone rang beside Nita's limp, outstretched arm.

"Oh God, oh God!" murmured Jimmy Lake. "This is too much. Nigel, will you—"

Nigel went to the door and spoke to one of the typists in the anteroom. "Please take all the director's calls out here. There's been an accident in his room, Miss Prince. Now, pull yourself together, Miss Grangely. Take all calls. Say the director is engaged. . . . Don't let anyone into his room. Not even the messengers. When a Superintendent Blount arrives, send him in. *No one* else. Got it? Oh yes, and cancel the director's conference with the Foreign Office people at midday; ring Mr. Gillespie at the F.O., and say the director has been compelled to cancel it. Then go round to my assistant and the deputy director's, and Mr. Squires', Mr. Ingle's and Mr. Billson's, and tell them we've been detained; tell them to carry on."

"Thank you, Nigel," said Jimmy Lake softly.

Harker Fortescue said: "Look here. If that damned stuff ought to have got onto *her* fingers, it ought to have got onto the fingers of whoever—"

"I agree," said the director. "I take it no one objects?"

"If you mean Mr. Strangeways is to go round smelling all our fingers, I must protest. It is a farcical proceeding," said Edgar Billson.

"Not a bit," exclaimed Merrion Squires. "Put us out of our misery. All but one of us, anyway." He held out his hands to Nigel.

The little scene that ensued was bizarre to a degree. The tall, loose-limbed figure of Nigel Strangeways bent over one hand after another, as if at some court ceremony. Even Edgar Billson gave way, though with bad grace. Finally Nigel extended his own fingers, first to the director, then to Charles Kennington.

"Well?" asked Merrion impatiently. "Who is the culprit?"

"Nobody's fingers smell of cyanide," replied Nigel.

There was a general stir of relief.

"May I return to my duties, then?" Billson said.

"Afraid not. For one thing, the stuff is highly volatile—"

"I could have told you that," interrupted Billson.

"—and it's some little time since—oh, well," Nigel sighed, "we must wait and see. And while we're waiting, I suppose we might as well try and find out what happened to Stultz' thing." He said it in a deliberately offhand way. He wanted to give the impression that he had relaxed. If people were a little off their guard, there might be interesting discrepancies between what they said now and their evidence to the police later when they would be very definitely on guard again—one of them, at least.

"Cook up your stories, boys," said Merrion Squires.

Billson glared at Nigel.

"I cannot concur in this procedure. The matter should be deferred until expert investigation by the police is, h'rrm, set on foot."

"Oh come, Billson," said the director, with a return to his normal manner, half coaxing, half authoritative. "Don't let's be stuffy. We've got to pass the time somehow."

They were all sitting at one end of the room now, some against the wall, others grouped round the director's desk. Alice Lake was in the director's chair, and he himself perched sideways on the desk, holding her hand again. It was as if they wished to huddle together for protection against the dead body of Nita slumped across her table at the other side of the room, one arm outstretched towards them in a stiffening pose of accusation. Between them and her, on the floor, lay the dividing sea of photographs, their groups disordered by the feet that had scuffled over them just now.

"I don't think we need go into *all* this," Alice Lake said. "When Nita came in again with the coffee tray—"

"Yes, your husband and I went to help her, I remember," said Brian Ingle dully.

Mrs. Lake went on. "Well, *I* had the thing then. You put the tray down on the desk, here—" she laid her fingers on the lefthand edge of the desk —"and I—let me think, what did I do with it?—yes, I had the thing in my right hand, and I put it down just behind me on the desk; I was standing in front of the desk, at the right-hand corner there. I put it down behind me to take my cup of coffee. Yes, that's right. And then my husband took out Mr. Squires' cover designs and went across the room to prop them up on the bookshelf."

"Did you notice the poison container there when you took the designs out of your drawer?" Nigel asked the director. "It was the top right-hand drawer, wasn't it?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact I did. It was lying beside my desk calender."

"You didn't move it or touch it then?"

"No."

"Very well," said Nigel. "Now, did you notice the container again after that, Mrs. Lake?"

"Yes. When Charles pointed to one of the designs and said, 'The murderous type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas'—I suppose it was an association of ideas—anyway, I glanced round, and the thing was still there, behind me."

"Did anyone happen to notice it on the desk after that?"

A silence.

"Did anyone else see it on the desk at any time?"

"I did," said Brian Ingle. "I mean, I saw Mrs. Lake put it down. That was just after N-Nita told us to come and get our coffee."

"Anyone else?"

Another silence.

"Well, that seems to look after the poison container. Now, Nita's cup was here—" Nigel indicated the righthand edge of the desk, near the director's calendar—"until her telephone rang and she took it over to her own table. From that point, she was in full view of everyone and it doesn't seem possible—"

"Don't forget we were all concentrated on the cover designs," said Harker Fortescue.

"That's true. But no one went near her desk, except Jimmy—"

Alice Lake cut in quickly. "Well, surely someone would have noticed it if my husband had broken the container into her cup then."

"Exactly," said Nigel. "In fact, she'd have been bound to spot it herself. So we're left with—"

"No," cried Brian Ingle, misunderstanding him. "She didn't! I—well, I *was* looking at her over there, I'd have seen—besides, she wouldn't have done it, it wasn't like her—"

His voice broke. Nigel said gently:

"People do kill themselves. People you wouldn't expect to."

"But they don't do it usually in front of a roomful of witnesses," said Charles Kennington. "Nigel, you said the cup was only a quarter full?"

"Yes. As you see, that's very significant. It means the poison couldn't have been put in till she'd drunk at least half of it—not with a quickly acting poison like this. And that cuts the murderer's operative period still finer."

Nigel was holding the center of the floor now, holding them all within the range of his pale blue eyes, which seemed so abstracted but missed so little. He went on.

"Let's get back to the cups. Nita's was on the director's desk, and Jimmy's must have been close beside it. When the telephone rang, Nita said, 'Which is mine?' And you, Brian, said, 'This one, isn't it?' And Nita said, 'No, that's Mr. Lake's.' "

"You mean, someone picked on the wrong cup to poison?" asked Merrion Squires, glancing sidelong from Alice Lake to Brian.

"I just want to get the position of the cups clear," replied Nigel. "When did you take up your cup again?" he asked Jimmy.

"Not till I went over to sit on Nita's table."

"How long between putting it down and taking it up?"

"Couple of minutes. No, less. About a minute, I should say," the director replied.

"And we have evidence," mocked Merrion Squires, his long clown's face grinning at them over the back of the chair on which he sat astride, "that, only half an hour prior to the crime, the director had had a bitter quarrel with M. Squires. Putting two and two together with his well-known genius for mental arithmetic, the astute Strangeways—"

"My dear," broke in Charles Kennington, a jagged edge on his voice, "my dear, let us under present circumstances try to avoid the more *vulgar* forms of facetiousness."

Nigel observed that Charles' delicate small hands were quivering and white at the knuckles. Nita's death had affected him more deeply than he had cared to betray—that was certain.

Merrion Squires' head had jerked sharply, as though from a physical slap in the face, and he was about to make an angry reply, when the tramp of feet was heard in the corridor.

"That's the police," said Nigel, going to the door.

Presently a doctor was bending over Nita's body, and a uniformed policeman sitting stolidly by her table, while Nigel a brief talk with Superintendent Blount in the anteroom. A few minutes later, he brought Blount and his accompanying detective sergeant into the director's room and effected introductions. The large room seemed to become even smaller. Jimmy Lake must have felt this too, for he asked if they couldn't clear up the photographs on the floor, which were getting in everyone's way.

"Rather leave things as they are, sir, just for a wee while," said Blount in that soothing voice which had given so many criminals so very wrong an idea of him. He broke off, to exchange a few muttered remarks with the doctor, who then took up his bag and departed.

"T'ck, t'ck. Puir young lady." Clucking commiserately, Blount turned to them again, an almost Pickwickian figure with his bald head, glittering spectacles and benevolent smile. "Mr. Strangeways tells me, sir, that none of you objects to being searched."

The director discreetly glanced round at his colleagues, like a hostess collecting eyes. "Quite right," he said.

"Well now, that's splendid. Shall we get it over right away? Sergeant Messer here will attend to it, and a female searcher is coming from Scotland Yard for you, madam." He bowed to Mrs. Lake. "Now, let me see, you're all busy people, I know; but I'm afraid we must keep you together in this room till—have you any screens handy, sir?"

"Yes, there's a big one in my room; I'll get it, shall I?" said the deputy director, beginning to move towards the door. Superintendent Blount put up a fat hand.

"I won't trouble you, sir," he said. "One of my men outside will fetch it, if you'll tell me where it is."

"My room's directly opposite this one, across the anteroom."

Blount went to the door and gave instructions. Presently the screen was fixed up in a corner of the director's room, and the detective sergeant started work. Jimmy Lake, by his own wish, was the first to be searched. When he came out from behind the screen, he was looking rather white, thought Nigel. Detective Sergeant Messer emerged, shook his head almost imperceptibly at Blount.

"You look a bit knocked up, sir," said Blount sympathetically. "A horrible shock for you, I'm sure, this puir young lady—horrible."

The director nodded, speechlessly, pulled out a silk handkerchief and mopped his face. Then he said:

"Well, Superintendent, you'll want to make arrangements for interviewing us, I suppose. Together or separately? And I hope you'll let me have this room back as soon as you can, my dear chap; I've got a lot of work to do."

Superintendent Blount nodded and clucked. "Most unfortunate. Most unfortunate. Busy man. Head of department. Work of national importance. T'ck, t'ck, t'ck. Must go over this room *vairy* carefully, though. Now, sir, what do you suggest?"

It was finally arranged that Jimmy Lake should carry on his work from the deputy director's room until his own had been examined, and that Blount should interview the party one by one, after each had passed the search, in the room of a member of the staff who was at present away on leave.

At eleven o'clock that night, Nigel Strangeways and Blount faced each other over a bottle of whisky. They were in a bedsitting room at Nigel's club, where he had lived ever since his wife, Georgia, was killed while driving an ambulance in the blitz of April, 1941.

"No, I really can not," Nigel was saying. "These people are my friends, after all; it's not like those other cases. Besides, in a way I know them *too* well. I've been working with them for five years, damn it, and I can't see them objectively any more."

But he knew this was only half the reason for his reluctance to help Blount. Georgia's death had left him mentally crippled. He had sought oblivion in the grinding, high-pressure work of the Ministry; but even this, as an opiate, was not strong enough. His lack of interest in the personal relationships of his colleagues—this, he realized now, was because he could not come home and talk to her about them. Georgia had helped him in so many of his cases, bringing her keen intuitive power to bear upon the facts and hints he collected. To become involved in a case again would be to remind himself at every step of it how much he had lost.

"Well, your very good health, Strangeways." The superintendent gazed ruminatively into his glass. "I'm so terribly shorthanded, just now, or I wouldn't ask you," he said after a pause.

"And I'm absolutely fagged out. I don't have ideas any more, I only have reflex actions."

"Hmm. Shall we play a game of piquet, then?"

"By all means." Nigel fetched the cards and they cut for elder hand. As Blount dealt, he said, "Major Kennington ought to be prosecuted for criminal negligence, of course. He'd no business to bring along that poison jigger at all; and then to hand it round and let it out of his sight—well, it was a scandalous thing."

"He couldn't have supposed there was a would-be poisoner amongst his old friends and relations, just waiting for the chance to—I'm taking all five," said Nigel, discarding. "Oh, damn and blast this pickup!"

"Which suggests that it was he himself who—"

"My dear old Superintendent, you know as well as I do that it doesn't suggest anything of the sort. You're just trying to draw me. All right, I'd rather discuss crime even than play this revolting hand." Nigel flung his cards on the table and refilled Blount's glass. "Well then, where *did* you find it?"

"We didn't. It wasn't on any of your people. I didn't expect it to be. But we took that room to pieces this afternoon and not a smell of the poison jigger. What d'you say now?"

"But it *must* be there."

"Believe you me, Strangeways, it wasn't. We don't miss things, and it's a bare bleak sort of room. No, your man must have flipped it out of the window immediately after he'd used it. We looked in the street below, of course, but—"

"He couldn't have done that. The windows were shut till after the girl died. Then Brian Ingle opened one. Oh Lord!"

"Ah-ha," said Blount.

"Nonsense. Brian was devoted to Nita. He'd never—"

"And that is assuming it was Nita the murderer wanted to poison. But there were several cups all close together on the desk."

"Look, Blount, if we're going to discuss this unsavory subject, we'd better do it in an orderly way. You tell me first what you got out of your interviews."

"That's better."

The superintendent took a gulp of his whisky and smacked his lips demonstratively. He knew how to handle Strangeways, he reflected with some complacence. Drawing a sheaf of papers from his sacklike pocket—typewritten copies of the interviews with the various witnesses—and occasionally glancing at one to refresh his memory, he gave Nigel a résumé of the evidence. As sifted and docketed in Nigel's mind, it amounted to this:—

First, the poison container. According to Charles Kennington, Jimmy Lake had suggested he should bring it along to the Ministry to show his old friends. According to Jimmy Lake, it was Charles' idea to bring it; but Jimmy agreed that, when he rang up Charles at Claridge's yesterday, he had invited him to come to the Ministry, and that it might possibly have been he who had put into Charles' head the idea of bringing the container then. "When I rang him up," Jimmy's evidence ran, "I congratulated him on capturing Stultz, and in the course of it said something about how I'd like to see the 'This-Way-to-Valhalla'—that's how he described the thing in his letter to me. Then I asked him to come round this morning, and tell us the story, and—yes, I did say, 'Bring all your trophies with you.' " Questioned again, Kennington had stuck to it that his brother-in-law had asked him to produce the container when he came.

" 'Bring your trophy with you,' is what he said—what I thought he said, anyway."

Second, the party. Of those present in the director's room, all but Alice Lake and Edgar Billson had on their own evidence been invited by the director during the previous day and been told by him that Kennington was going to bring the poison container to show them. It was all over the division, they said. Billson, however, denied having heard anything about the party until Miss Prince had rung him up, just before eleven o'clock that morning, and asked him to come to the director's room. Mrs. Lake said that her brother had telephoned to her the previous day, immediately after his arrival in London. No, it hadn't been a shock. A happy surprise, certainly; but she had never believed Charles was dead. He had told her he probably couldn't come and see her till the next day, as he would have to be closeted with some brass hats. Her husband had told her about the party, but not invited her; she didn't go to his office much anyway, and she would rather be alone with Charles the first time she met him again. Charles, however, when he turned up at her home at ten the next morning, insisted on her going along to the Ministry with him. Neither he nor Jimmy had mentioned to her that he was bringing the container. Mrs. Lake's evidence was corroborated by her husband and her brother.

Third, the coffee cups. The testimony of the several witnesses, though it amplified what they had told Nigel immediately after the event, did not seem to contradict it at any point. Superintendent Blount had painstakingly gone into the history of the cups. Miss Finlay had been immediately behind Miss Prince in the queue at the trolley, and testified that she had seen her go straight into the anteroom with the tray; one of the typists in the anteroom had seen her pass through into the director's room. Apart from the obvious improbability of it, there was eyewitness evidence that Miss Prince could not have put some private supply of poison into one of the cups on her way from the trolley. Brian Ingle had been very insistent, furthermore, that she did not use Stultz' thing to poison her coffee. He had hardly taken his eyes off her all the time they were in the director's room—"I was very fond of her. And she looked so strange—different somehow—very excited and beautiful, but somehow I felt she was terribly unhappy, no, perhaps not unhappy—uncertain, on the edge of something, underneath it all."

Fourth, the grouping. Blount had worked on this point with great tenacity, checking and counterchecking the movements of each of those present in the director's room, from the moment when Nita Prince returned with the tray, in relation to the coffee cups of the director and

Miss Prince. The gist of this was that, unless Mrs. Lake and her husband and Brian Ingle were all lying, the poison container could not have been used till after the tray had been put down on the director's desk, and Nita had told them all to come and get their coffee. From that point there was Alice's evidence that she had placed the container on the desk behind her, and Jimmy's that he had noticed it there when he took the designs out of his drawer. Unless they were both lying, it could not have been used up to that point. If they were lying, Blount's analysis of the grouping showed that every member of the party was at one moment or another near enough the desk to have poisoned Nita's cup, or the director's, while they were putting up the designs on the bookshelf. But why should Jimmy and Alice have both lied, when the lie would only exculpate the others? Finally, Alice had repeated her statement that she had seen the container on the desk when her brother made his remark about "the bloodthirsty type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas." If she were telling the truth, this cleared the director, who was standing in the middle of the room from that point till Nita's telephone rang, and she carried her cup over to her own table. It also cleared Charles Kennington, who on the evidence of Harker Fortescue had then moved well away to the left of the desk. It did not absolutely clear anyone else, for they had all been shifting their positions, close to the desk, to get a good view of the cover designs, and anyone might have poisoned either Jimmy's cup or Nita's, which were standing side by side on the desk. On the other hand, the period between Charles' remark and Nita's telephone ringing was extremely short—less than half a minute, Blount reckoned. But then again, why should Alice Lake lie when the lie only called attention to her own proximity to the two cups and narrowed down the period within which the poison could have been decanted?

Fifth, the motive. In his first series of interviews, Blount had contented himself with the formal question, did anyone know any reason why the dead girl should have been murdered or have killed herself? The answers had been vague, or entirely negative. Brian Ingle had repeated his statement that she seemed on the edge of something. Merrion Squires said she had been "agitated" that morning and the evening before. The director, frankly admitting that Nita had been his mistress, said she was very upset when Charles Kennington's letter came, worrying how her ex-fiancé would take it; she felt they ought to tell Charles the truth, how he had tried to dissuade her from doing this at once—after all, he had said, it was four years since Charles had gone back on active service, and she had not seen him after that, and had had every reason lately to believe he was dead; Charles could not possibly assert any claim over her now, and he might well have lost interest in her anyway. Major Kennington agreed that he and Nita were "sort of engaged" while he was working at the Ministry, but he said their correspondence had faded out some time before his "death" was announced in the casualty lists, and he had certainly not expected her to "fall into my arms" on his return. Did he know whether her affections had been engaged elsewhere? "No, not for certain. But I didn't flatter myself a sumptuous girl like Nita would go for long without comforters."

Alice Lake said she had known about Nita and her husband for some time; Jimmy, in fact, had told her; she had accepted it; as long as it made him happy, she would put up with it.

"So there you are," said Blount, slapping his bald head repeatedly—a sign that he was perplexed. "We have a murder that might just conceivably have been a suicide. We haven't a whiff of motive for either suicide or murder. We have a girl poisoned in full view of eight people, including your own good self. We have a poison container which disappears into thin air—no, we roped off the street underneath that room, and we searched every inch of it for fifty yards, either way, and it wasn't there; it's a wee thing, of course, and might have got stuck to the tire of a passing car—I've appeals going out on the radio in case any pedestrian picked it up, but I'm not vairy optimistic. And, as if that wasn't enough, we don't even know whether the murderer got the person he wanted to; he could easily have poisoned that puir girl's cup by mistake for Mr. Lake's. And, worst of all, there's the spontaneous nature of the crime."

"Spontaneous?"

"No one could have known, till the day before, that there was going to be poison available in the director's room."

"No one but Charles Kennington."

"Granted. And nobody could have relied upon Kennington's letting the poison container out of his own hands. It's almost as though the crime had been unpremeditated. 'By Jove,' someone says, 'there's that jigger lying on the desk! Well, since it's going begging, I might as well break it into one of these coffee cups.' "

"Yes, it does seem a spur-of-the-moment job," agreed Nigel.

"The hell of it is that we should know all about where the poison came from. The usual way we get a poisoner is through his source of supply, as you know—suspect *A* is recognized by the chemist who sold him the weed killer. But this crime of yours—" Blount broke off, throwing up his hands disgustedly.

"It is a point in favor of suicide, of course. I mean, a person who is in a state of mind favorable to suicide would be more likely to succumb to the impulse, when she found the means handy. A would-be murderer doesn't wait about, relying on being presented with the means by fortune."

"You'd say that it was suicide then, or else Major Kennington did it?" asked Blount with a shrewd look at Nigel through his steel-rimmed spectacles.

Nigel was gazing noncommittally at his Bonnard on the opposite wall. "I'd like to know where and when Kennington met her yesterday," he said.

The superintendent positively bounced in his chair. "What the devil d'you mean? He said nothing about—"

"That's just it. Why didn't he? When he turned up in the director's room this morning, he greeted us all very vivaciously, as long-lost friends. Then Nita said to him: 'You do look different in uniform.' Now, when he was working at the Ministry, in 1940-41, he always wore uniform. If Nita hadn't seen him since then—in fact, if she hadn't seen him very recently, in mufti, why should she say that? Kennington tried to cover it up very quickly; he started babbling away again, said, 'It seems years since I saw any of you,' and Nita took the cue and remarked presently that he'd only been wearing one medal ribbon when last she saw him. I suggest, Blount, that it would be worth your while to look particularly close into Nita's movements, and Charles', yesterday. I say they met somewhere, and he was in mufti."

"Oh, you ruffian!" exclaimed Blount, rubbing his hands in high glee. "Here's the man who doesn't want to have anything to do with the case! Routine investigation, mind you, routine investigation. We're looking into the girl's movements, of course. And her history. We've been going over her flat this evening. One or two vairy interesting little finds." He paused suggestively, but Nigel did not rise to the bait. "And now you've uncorked yourself, what else have you to tell me?"

Nigel related the conversation between the director and Nita which Merrion Squires had overheard the previous day and the quarrel between Harker Fortescue and Edgar Billson reported to him by Miss Finlay. There were several little signs and omens filed away in his mind, but he was not going to lay them before Blount yet.

"Oh well, now. Miss Prince seems to have been a—e'eh, a stormy petrel," said the superintendent. He mixed himself another glass of whisky, held it up to the light, drank. "Invigorating beverage. Most invigorating. . . . And what did *you* think about her?" he shot out suddenly.

"I wish you wouldn't use your third-degree tricks on me," protested

Nigel. "My nerves won't stand it. I didn't think about my colleagues much. Who does? What do *you* think about Detective Sergeant Messer?"

"A good man. Energetic. Ambitious. A bit of a snob. Clever. But too apt to jump to conclusions—he's young, you see—and when you're young and clever, you get impatient with routine detail; you see the logical conclusion afar off, so you're apt to jump some of the stages on the way to it."

"He's not thorough, you mean?"

Blount looked really shocked. "My dear sir, he's a trained man. Our men are always thorough. I said impatient over detail. He wouldn't live an hour with me if he scamped it."

"Well, let's say he's a human being trained to be a machine, and leave it at that. Now that's my point. We in the Visual Propaganda Division—we're all human beings, rather clever and unusual ones for the most part, and we've been trained or had to train ourselves, in a highly technical, highly mechanical routine. The first principle of our kind of propaganda is the human touch; but, to keep pace with the demands, we had to mechanize it—to work out a detailed, *in*human sort of routine for delivering the human touch punctually and in large quantities."

"A mass-emotion factory?" suggested Blount.

"If you like. And the operatives are engaged in producing natural emotions by artificial methods. Bad for them. You can understand the effect this was likely to have on their private lives. It led to a certain unreality, and therefore a certain irresponsibility, in their ordinary human relationships."

"You're thinking of Nita Prince?"

"No, as a matter of fact I'm thinking chiefly of the director." Nigel paused a moment. "Merrion Squires described Nita as a carnivorous orchid. He's too fond of flashy phrases. She's—she was a good deal more complicated than that. But Merrion had the right idea, in one way. I fancy her surface was very deceptive. 'A beautiful blonde'—suppose I say that, what do you think of?—an easy, decorative, rather nitwitted creature: a pin-up girl with flashing teeth and legs a mile long and a figure that means one thing only: a smooth, golden, varnished, primitive fantasy. Now Nita was all that. On the surface. But something more, too. There was something in her eye, and her voice, that said, 'I'm really quite different underneath. Am I fire, or ice? Wouldn't you like to know? Come and find out.' "

"And what did you find?"

"I didn't accept the invitation myself. I don't know who did, apart from Kennington and the director. Brian Ingle thought her a goddess;

Merrion Squires, a straight bitch. Infinite variety. I daresay they were just painting their fantasies on that smooth, white surface. And suppose —just suppose, Blount—that beneath it she wasn't fire, or ice, but an ordinary woman, vulnerable, foolish and shrewd, a realist about her own feelings, a self-deceiver about others'; wanting a home and children, maybe—a cozy, humdrum life with hubby coming back from the office at 5 P.M. and a fortnight at Skegness in the summer. Suppose she hated being a sort of shiny human Odeon, a Palace of Pleasure, a Temple of Mystery—"

"I'm thinking you'd better meet me at her flat tomorrow morning, if Mr. Lake will give you time off," said Blount.

"Suppose *that* was what she wanted someone to find out," Nigel pursued, "wouldn't you have an interesting motive for—" He broke off a moment. "That reminds me. A queer little slip of the tongue. Probably means nothing. I told you Charles Kennington used a phrase about one of Squires' designs—'a bloodthirsty type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas.' A few minutes later, Mrs. Lake repeated the phrase exactly; there was a mild joke—the deputy director saying the design was suitable for a volume of Bloomsbury belles-lettres. Well, after it happened, I was trying to find out what had become of the poison container. And Mrs. Lake said she had last noticed it on the desk when Charles said, 'the *murderous* type peering out from amidst the bougainvilleas.' One word changed, which she had got right before. It may have been pure accident. On the other hand, that piece of evidence cleared her husband; if the container *was* still on the desk at that point, you'll remember, he could not have poisoned Nita's coffee. But, if she'd seen him do it, or suspected that he might have done it, and wished to shield him, that is just the lie a clever woman would tell. And the slip of the tongue which made her say 'murderous' would reveal what was in her mind."

"E'eh well, that's too fanciful for me," said Blount, rising to go. "It's terrible late. I must be off. A most interesting chat, Strangeways. I'm obliged to you. And if you should happen to be at 19 Dickens Street at ten o'clock tomorrow—" At the door, Blount turned again. "And don't forget, her husband was not the only person in the room cleared by that piece of evidence of Mrs. Lake's."

Chapter 4

Reference: Miss N. Prince

"So this," said Nigel, peering inquisitively about him, "is the lovenest."

It was ten-thirty on the following morning. Nigel had gone to the Ministry even earlier than usual and, working rapidly, polished off several jobs outstanding from the previous day. He then went to look for the director, whom he found in his room talking with the Ministry's investigations officer, Mr. Adcock—a fat, cheerful lethargic ex-policeman who, apart from the mysterious outbreak of coat slashing last winter, had had nothing worse on his hands than the usual lost property and petty pilfering troubles since he was appointed to the Ministry.

"Yes, Nigel?" Jimmy Lake asked gently. He looked washed out and preoccupied. Nigel told him of Superintendent Blount's request.

"But of course," said Jimmy. "Take the day off. Call it duty leave. And I'd like to borrow your room and your assistant, if I may; I don't find this room terribly congenial just now."

They had a few more words together. Edgar Billson was seething, the director said, because he was due to go on leave at the end of the week, and the police had requested that none of those present in Jimmy's room the previous morning should leave London. The work of the division was going to be seriously hampered by the police investigation, tactful and reasonable though Superintendent Blount seemed to be. And on top of this there was the idiotic little trouble of a missing secret file; however, Jimmy wouldn't bother him with that now—Mr. Adcock and the Registry would have to thrash it out between them.

Nigel stopped on the way out to tell Miss Finlay that the director would be using his room.

"You'd better ask now for all his telephone calls to be switched to my extension. Look after him, won't you? He's just about all in."

Pamela Finlay was relatively subdued this morning. Indeed, the whole floor gave the impression of an uneasy and muted atmosphere as though someone were gravely ill; voices spoke more quietly, feet trod more discreetly, and the sudden rattle of a typewriter sounded like a quarrel in a sick room.

"Some of the typists are in a flap," said Miss Finlay with a strenuous effort to moderate her usual breezy tones.

"What, afraid they'll be the next to go? Tell them not to be such asses."

"I will," said Miss Finlay formidably. "It'll be a pleasure. Gossip, gossip, gossip all the time, these girls. Is it true, Strangeways, that you're in with the police? They're saying—"

"The superintendent is an old friend of mine. By the way, what's this about a secret file missing? Have you heard anything?"

"No. Oh, wait a minute. Is that the file the director was clamoring for yesterday afternoon? PHQ14/150? Haven't they found it yet? I bet the D.D. is sitting on it."

Nigel remembered vaguely now. Merrion Squires had come in, about five o'clock, asking for some file which the Registry claimed had been charged to the director but which he had not received. Nigel had paid no attention to it at the time, beyond asking Miss Finlay to make sure it was not in their room. He remembered her shocked expression, though, when Merrion Squires said, "Secretaries come and secretaries go, but files go on for ever."

"The Irish," he said now, "do not have quite our ideas about the sanctity of human life."

Miss Finlay's eyes widened.

"So it *was* Merrion Squires. Have the police arrested him?"

"Great Scott, no! I was thinking about the Irish character, not—you really mustn't jump to conclusions like this, or you'll involve me in an action for slander."

"Sorry," said Miss Finlay, without any obvious sign of remorse. "Forget it. Not but what I don't think he'd have done it like a shot if—no love lost between him and Miss Prince, you'll have to admit, Strangeways."

"My dear good girl, there's no love lost between myself and Mr. Billson, but we contrive not to murder each other."

Pamela Finlay opened her mouth for one of her usual bellows of laughter; then clapped her hand over it, and looked reproachfully at Nigel, as though he was to blame for the indiscretion. Nigel turned the subject to the day's work and gave Miss Finlay some instructions. Presently he was on a bus, traveling eastward to the Bloomsbury thoroughfare off which lay Dickens Street.

"So this is the lovenest," he said to Superintendent Blount. "Well, what did I tell you?"

"You'd been here before, maybe?"

"Never."

"An astute guess of yours, then."

Nita Prince's flat occupied the top floor of 19 Dickens Street. Below it, Nigel had noticed, were on the ground floor a solicitor's office, and on the first and second floors the office of a small publishing firm. There was also a basement, where presumably a caretaker lived, for a dog had barked furiously from below as he climbed the stairs. Very convenient, he had thought, peering at the publisher's discreet brass plate on the first-floor landing; this chap and the lawyer pack up at five or six in the evening, and after that the whole house is empty; no one to see who visited Nita unless the caretaker is a busybody. Very convenient for Nita. Very inconvenient for Blount, though, possibly.

The superintendent let him in.

"Yes, you can touch anything. My fingerprint chap has been over the rooms," were his first words. "This is the sitting room. Bedroom and bathroom in there. Kitchen through that door. A homey little place."

Blount had said it. Nothing less like the film producer's idea of a lovenest could be imagined. No seductive divans, no glittering cocktail cabinet, no wardrobe filled with slinky gowns, no signed photographs, no titillating multiplicity of mirrors. No glamour at all. Not even the stale waft of an exotic perfume in the air. If the rooms were stuffy at all, it was only with the stuffiness of an almost aggressive respectability. On the iron four-poster bed lay a plain white satin nightdress, neatly folded. This note of severity was repeated on the dressing table, which lacked the usual litter.

In vials of ivory and colored glass
Unstoppered, lurked her strange synthetic
perfumes,
Unguent, powdered, or liquid. . . .

Nigel found himself murmuring, as he eyed the plain wooden-backed hairbrushes, the businesslike comb, the simple handkerchief-sachet smelling—of all things—of lavender. Nita's beauty preparations he found tucked away at the back of a drawer. And, at the back of his mind, a new idea of Nita began to form—an idea about her and Jimmy which finally determined him to alter his last night's resolution that he would not become further involved in the case.

He wandered back into the sitting room, absent mindedly carrying a threadbare woolly rabbit which he had found on Nita's bedside chair.

"I find all this very pathetic," he said to Blount, who was rummaging in the drawers of a bureau. He put down the rabbit on the mantelpiece, beside a briar pipe which lay there—Jimmy Lake's, no doubt. "It only needs—well I'm blest, and here it is!" He picked up darning needles and yarn and a man's sock from the seat of a chintz-covered armchair.

"Quite a domesticated sort of lassie, you'd think," said Blount. "But look at this now."

He held out a sheaf of newspaper clippings to Nigel. The top one revealed the dead girl wearing a bathing suit and a photogenic smile, surrounded by a posturing, simpering bevy of nymphs; underneath ran the caption MISS NITA PRINCE, EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD WINNER OF THE "DAILY CLARION" SEASIDE LOVELIES COMPETITION, with some other competitors. The date of the paper was August, 1936.

"I bet you found these tucked away at the back of a drawer too," said Nigel.

"As a matter of fact I did. What's in your mind?"

"Which drawer?"

Blount pointed.

"It was the only one locked. You'll see why."

Nigel pulled the drawer right out from the bureau and laid it on the floor. He turned over the contents. Bundles of letters tied up with bright ribbons. A large foolscap envelope, out of which Nigel shook some photographs; these too revealed Nita Prince, but not this time in a bathing suit. On the back of them was stamped FORTESCUE. PHOTOGRAPHIC AGENCY.

"You've noticed this, of course?" he asked.

"Yes. She used to model for what they call art studies. Mr. Fortescue told me that himself."

"Hm. The body of a well-nourished young woman," Nigel murmured. "What squalid phrases the police do use. Anything in the letters?"

"I'm afraid the puir lassie was rather—e'eh, rather fast living in her younger days," replied Blount primly.

"No recent letters, you mean?"

"Well, there are a few notes from Mr. Lake. But nothing from Major Kennington. I think that's a little strange, seeing she kept so much. And you'll find a ribbon, same kind as those other ones, in the wastepaper basket." Blount glanced significantly at Nigel. "A ribbon, but no letters to go with it."

"I see your point. But it's rather odd that a person should take away his bundle of letters and leave the ribbon behind, isn't it?"

"People do silly things. That's how stupid policemen catch up with them."

Nigel began to prowl round the room again. He paused at a Matthew

Smith still life on the wall opposite the fireplace. His eye moved to the chintz covers and the deep marron curtains, to the E.M.G gramophone and the albums of records beside it—Beethoven quartets, Mozart, Sibelius symphonies, the Enigma Variations. Nita, or Jimmy, had been improving Nita's taste. He moved over to the bookshelf. Yes, relegated to the bottom shelves were the romantic novelettes, the tattered film magazines, the detective novels of Miss Prince's unregenerate days; above them were ranged more serious reading—copies of the Everyman edition; a row of the English poets, with Jimmy Lake's favorite Victorians bulking large; novels by E. M. Forster, D. H. Lawrence, Henry Green.

Nigel picked up a green-covered book lying on the table beside the armchair. POEMS *by A. H. Clough, sometime Fellow of Oriel College, Oxford.* On the flyleaf, "N. with love from J., July 28, 1945." Nigel turned to the pages between which the marker lay. A passage was marked in pencil—a line at the side of it, and an exclamation mark.

> Terrible word, obligation! You should not, Eustace,
> you should not.
> No, you should not have used it. But oh, great Heavens,
> I repel it!
> Oh, I cancel, reject, disavow and repudiate wholly
> Every debt in this kind, disclaim every claim, and
> dishonor,
> Yes, my own heart's own writing, my soul's own
> signature! Ah, no!
> I will be free in this; you shall not, none shall,
> bind me.
> No, my friend, if you wish to be told, it was this above
> all things
> This that charmed me, ah, yes, even this, that she
> held me to nothing.
> No, I could take as I pleased; come close; fasten
> ties as I fancied;
> Bind and engage myself deep,—and lo, on the following
> morning
> It was all e'en as before, like losings in games played
> for nothing.
> Yes, when I came, with mean fears in my soul, with a
> semi-performance
> At the first step breaking down in its pitiful role of
> evasion,

When to shuffle I came, to compromise, not meet,
engagements,
Lo, with her calm eyes there she met me and knew
nothing of it,—
Stood, unexpecting, unconscious. *She* spoke not of
obligations,
Knew not of debt,—ah, no, I believe you, for excellent
reasons.*

"Listen to this, Blount," said Nigel, and read the passage aloud.

When he had ended, the superintendent smacked his bald head. "Oh dear me, dear me. Don't like him. An egotist. A bad case of negativism. Won't take the plunge. Wants to eat his cake and have it. T'ck, t'ck, t'ck."

"He's honest about himself, though."

"Egotists often are. They can afford to be. I mean they take so much credit for being honest that it quite obscures for them the unpleasant picture of themselves the honesty has revealed. But this isn't getting us any forrader."

"I'm not so sure. Here's a book Jimmy Lake gave Nita only a few days ago. Either he or she has marked this passage with a query and—hello, what's this?"

Nigel was holding the book closer to his face; he went over to the window, beckoned to Blount, pointed out to him a faint pencil mark he had not noticed before, in the margin against the last few lines of the poem:—A

"A capital A," said Nigel. "Could stand for Alice. The complacent Alice Lake, who doesn't hold Jimmy to his married obligations. Just read the passage again, Blount, and see how neatly the 'she' in it fits Mrs. Lake—the unexacting woman who doesn't hold her husband to anything; who, when he comes in his 'pitiful role of evasion,' meets him calmly, takes no notice of his embarrassment, says nothing of any debt he owes her. Incidentally, the 'he' is not a bad picture of Jimmy, either. I should imagine he's pretty hard to nail down, you know, in affairs of the heart."

"What you're telling me," said Blount slowly, "is that a man doesn't murder his mistress when he has a complacent wife."

"Exactly. Or suppose this exclamation mark in the margin is ironical, on the other hand. Suppose Alice Lake is in fact extremely jealous and has been kicking up a fuss, and behaving altogether unlike the woman in the poem. Well, a man may murder a jealous wife because she stands in his way, but—"

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"—But he only murders his mistress if she has been carrying on with someone else, or driving him potty with her demands?"

"And does this pleasant domestic scene look as if Nita was flighty? No. She'd obviously settled down to be a home from home for Jimmy."

The telephone rang, and Blount went to answer it. After a brief conversation, he put back the receiver. "They've done the autopsy," he said. "The container was not in the body. That seems to dispose of the possibility of suicide. There was just a bare chance she might have swallowed the thing after biting it, though that way it'd have been difficult to account for the traces of poison in her cup."

"Where on earth did the container get to, then?"

"Well, either Mr. Ingle threw it out of the window, or—"

"Or one of your searchers slipped up."

"I can't think that possible," said Blount, a little stiffly. "I admit that, from my point of view, the personal search was rather a formality. After all, the last thing a murderer would do, after breaking the container into a cup, is to keep it on his person. He only had to drop it anywhere in that big room, and there was plenty of time for him to do it, *after* you'd told them there'd have to be a personal search as well as before. But still, I don't believe my people could have made a mistake."

"It seems to me you're in a proper jam. Means—anyone in the room had it. Opportunity—anyone in the room had it, unless Mrs. Lake is telling the truth when she says she saw the container on the desk a minute before the girl was killed. So you're left with motive."

"Quite a classical case of bricks without straw," said Blount drily. "That's why you've got to come in on it. You're in a far better position than the police to work on the motive angle."

Nigel, standing by the mantelpiece, gazed at the threadbare woolly rabbit.

"I'm not sure I won't change my mind," he said at last. "I don't like all this—this pathetic homemaking broken up. What about Kennington's movements the day before the crisis? And Nita's?" he asked abruptly.

"Kennington is covered from the moment he got back to London till ten-thirty that night. He left the War Office at ten-twenty. A War Office car took him to Claridge's, where he went straight up to his room. All that is checked. He couldn't have met Miss Prince before then. He claims he went to bed. At any rate, the night porters say he didn't go out again. Now for Miss Prince. She left the Ministry at six-thirty. Came straight back here. About six-forty she came in and told Mrs. Humble—that's the caretaker—she'd be having a visitor later and not to bother when the bell rang—she'd open the front door herself. Shortly after eight, Mrs. Humble heard someone let himself in. This, it appears, was Mr. Lake. He volunteered himself that he went to Dickens Street then, intending to spend the night here, but Nita Prince seemed out-of-sorts and not very welcoming, so he left about nine o'clock, returned to the Ministry, worked late and slept there. Mrs. Humble assumed *he* must have been the visitor Miss Prince had referred to. So, when the front door bell rang, a little after eleven o'clock, she came upstairs to answer it. But she heard Miss Prince running downstairs, so she just poked her head round the door between the basement staircase and the hall. She saw Miss Prince open the front door and let a woman in."

"A woman!" exclaimed Nigel.

"Uh-huh. She couldn't see this woman very clearly—there's only a dimmed electric light in the hall; but she thinks she might be able to recognize her again. Well, Mrs. Humble went to bed. She was awakened by her dog barking—it barks whenever anyone goes out or comes in. She heard the front door closing. She looked at her alarm clock. It was ten minutes to one. And the dog only barked four times that night—for Mr. Lake's arrival and departure, and for the second visitor's ditto. So she didn't have any other visitors."

Nigel pondered this for a moment. The second visitor—Nita's girl friends surely would not in the normal way call so late. And why should she so obviously have wished to get rid of Jimmy Lake before this visitor arrived, unless she had something to say to her which she didn't want Jimmy to hear? And, the day after, Nita was murdered. As if in response to Nigel's next thought, Blount remarked,

"Mrs. Humble did say that the visitor, the woman, was small—not so tall as Miss Prince, anyway."

"Have you questioned Alice Lake yet about it?"

"I'm expecting her here—" Blount looked at his wrist watch, "in five minutes or so. I rang up her house early this morning, as soon as I'd had my chat with Mrs. Humble."

"She made no objection to coming here?"

"None at all. Mrs. Humble will bring her up. If she recognizes her, she'll nod to me. If she isn't sure, she'll shake her head."

"Hm. Quite a moment. As far as it goes."

Nigel turned back to the bookshelf. No, Nita Prince's education did not seem to have included the novels of Alice Kennington: they were too satirical for her taste, perhaps; too satirical, perhaps, even for Jimmy. If Alice was at all like the novels she wrote under her maiden name, one could understand why Jimmy had taken up with the so very human Nita, the old-fashioned home-girl-at-heart Nita.

"You took all their fingerprints, I suppose?"

"Yesterday afternoon," replied Blount. "No one objected. Except Billson, who seems to object to everything on principle. But he came round presently. And my fingerprint chap went all over these rooms last night. We'll know the results about midday. Of course," he added grimly, "ladies are apt to wear gloves when they pay social calls."

"No glasses or things lying about?"

"Mrs. Humble washed everything up yesterday morning. Just Miss Prince's breakfast things, she said. If either of the visitors had a drink, Miss Prince must have washed up the glasses herself. Not much to drink, anyway. A bottle of gin and some lime juice in the kitchen cupboard. That's all."

A few minutes later the bell rang, and footsteps were heard coming up the steep stairs. The sitting-room door opened. Alice Lake stood there, glancing at them a little timidly. Just behind her was a slatternly-looking woman, grinning from ear to ear and nodding her head vigorously at the superintendent. Blount's face was quite impassive; but his brow knitted in momentary vexation when Major Kennington stepped into the room after his sister.

"I hope I'm not *de trop,* my dears," he said brightly. "But Alice felt she needed moral support."

"Just so," said Blount. "That's quite all right. I'm sorry to have dragged you along here, Mrs. Lake, but it was simpler—do sit down, won't you?"

Nigel was familiar with the spectacle of Superintendent Blount putting a witness at ease. The courtly, considerate manner; the Pickwickian jollity; the appearance of slight obtuseness. He had seen clever people fall for it—seen them relax, and a consciousness of intellectual superiority creep into their faces or their words—ah yes, not so very formidable after all, I think I can twist *him* round my finger all right. And Nigel had seen such people sadly discomfited. Alice Lake is a clever woman, he thought quietly surveying her from the window seat, while Blount worked his confidence trick. A clever actress too—that is, if she *was* in this room two nights ago—glancing around her with just the right suggestion of curiosity and faint embarrassment as if to say, "So *this* is where she and Jimmy lived." And an attractive woman, in her severe, composed sort of way. Nigel eyed her small, neat profile; the hair brushed up from the back in the neo-Edwardian manner; the delicate features—long, thin, slightly retroussé nose, ironical mouth, waxen little ears; the black coat and skirt and frilled white silk blouse, small feet and white-gloved hands; so crisp and cool compared with most London women after six years of war.

"—Yes, I'm afraid there's no doubt the puir lassie was murdered," Blount was saying in his most avuncular tones. "T'ck, t'ck, a sorry business. Now I'm sure you'll understand, Mrs. Lake, how much depends on your evidence."

Alice Lake raised her plucked eyebrows, said nothing.

"That point about the poison container still being on the desk when you said it was—barely a minute before Miss Prince took her cup away to her own table. You're quite sure it was?"

"Oh yes. Quite sure."

"No possibility that it could have been used already, and put back there? Could you see all of it, or only a bit of it? It was lying beside your husband's calendar, wasn't it?"

"Yes. I could see it all. Of course, I don't know how different it'd have looked if it had been used."

"Oh, you'd have noticed the difference all right," Charles Kennington put in. "They're fragile, brittle things. It'd have been broken right across."

"Just so," said Blount. "Your evidence clears your good husband, you realize."

"I'm glad to hear that," Mrs. Lake replied coldly. "And it happens also to be true. I'm not lying to protect anyone, I can assure you. I'm not made that way."

"My sister is a madly Victorian girl," said Charles. "She really believes that truth must always prevail. The blue-stocking type."

"Do be quiet, Charles," said Alice impatiently.

Blount proceeded. "But of course your evidence does not clear *you*. You were within easy reach of the poison container and Miss Prince's cup."

"I realize that too," said Alice. Nigel chalked it up to her—whether a good mark or a bad, he was not sure—that she did not point out how unlikely it would be for a murderer to have volunteered so readily so dangerous a piece of information.

Blount tickled the tip of his nose.

"You would not, in any case, have any strong impulse to protect your husband?"

"Oh, but I might indeed. I'm extremely fond of Jimmy. Just because I let him live his own life—"

Charles Kennington sighed, rolled up his eyes, lifted his hands theatrically. Alice's policy of *laissez-faire* was clearly a matter of disagreement between them.

"—Yes, Charles, live his own life; it doesn't mean that I am indifferent to him. But there'd have been no point in his poisoning that girl, don't you see? Therefore, no point in my trying to shield him."

"Quite so," said Blount with an approving nod. "Now, had your husband given any indication to you recently that his affair with Miss Prince was petering out? Or that she was—e'eh, not playing straight with him—some other man, perhaps?"

"Oh indeed, no. In fact, a month or two ago, he sounded me out about divorce. In his rather circuitous way." Alice Lake smiled faintly. "I suppose she'd been nagging at him a bit. I can quite understand. It couldn't have been altogether a satisfactory life for her, all this—" her gloved hand made a slight gesture at the top floor of No. 19 Dickens Street.

"Well now, this is most interesting. And what did you say?"

"I told Jimmy if he must, he must. I told him I'd be terribly upset," her high, cool voice continued, "but he must make up his own mind—I wasn't going to do it for him. If you want to know, I'd say he dashed straight along here and told her he couldn't press a divorce on me, it would break my heart."

Blount blinked a little. "That's exceedingly frank, Mrs. Lake. And Miss Prince wouldn't accept the situation? And that's why she wanted to see you, to have a private talk about it?"

"A private talk?"

"Yes, when you came here the other night."

Mrs. Lake's green eyes opened wide. "But—there must be some mistake. I've never been here in my life before."

Major Kennington rose from the arm of her chair, on which he had been sitting, and went to stand with his back to the fireplace. He glanced from Alice to Blount, in a quick, amused way, as though they were dueling over some abstract subject.

"Come now, Mrs. Lake," said Blount. "I have a witness who saw Miss Prince let you in at the front door just after eleven o'clock two nights ago."

"But that's nonsense," she replied sharply. "I was in bed then, in my own house."

"Can you—e'eh, prove that, Mrs. Lake?"

"I don't expect so. Let me see. Well, my husband rang me up at ten-thirty to say he'd be working late at the Ministry and sleeping there. But, no, I suppose I can't. I was alone in the house."

"Who is this informant of yours?" asked her brother in the embarrassed pause.

"Mrs. Humble. The caretaker here."

"Could we not have a word with her? Identities are sometimes mistaken."

"Surely." Blount rang down to the basement on the speaking tube. Presently Mrs. Humble arrived, grinning, panting and disheveled.

"Is this the lady you saw Miss Prince let in two nights ago?" Blount asked.

" 'Sright. Didn't yer see me nod? That's 'er."

"You're quite sure you couldn't be mistaken?" Blount asked carefully.

"I'ope I'as the use of me eyes still," said Mrs. Humble, bridling. "Same 'eight. Same peekong little fice. A real lady, I says to myself. That's 'er all right, all right, take my ruddy oath."

"Did you notice how she was dressed?" asked Charles Kennington.

"Black three-quarter-length coat, ever so chick. White blouse. White kid gloves."

"What kind of hat was I wearing?" asked Alice.

"Get on with you, m'm! As if you didn't know! One of them 'alo 'ats, black straw, awiy from the fice."

There seemed no more to be said. Blount told the woman she could go. But, when the door closed behind her, Mrs. Lake quietly remarked,

"I'm afraid it *must* be a case of mistaken identity, Superintendent. You see I never wear hats. Don't possess one. Anyone will tell you."

The superintendent took it very well. Clucking, beaming, massaging his bald head, he said,

"Well now, t'ck, t'ck, t'ck, that just shows one can't be too careful. Very smart of you, Mrs. Lake, that question about the hat. Capital. Capital. Puts the lid on it, as you might say." He chuckled, with the Scotsman's ripe appreciation of his own witticisms. "It seems you must have a double, Mrs. Lake."

Nigel spoke up for the first time since the visitors had arrived.

"Charles," he said. "When we met in Jimmy's room yesterday morning, Nita said to you, 'You do look different in uniform.' Implying she'd seen you recently *not* in uniform. You said, in your letter to Jimmy, that you'd been doing one of your female impersonation turns to catch Stultz. You are the same height as your sister, and resemble her closely in features. Don't tell me she has yet another double."

Charles Kennington had buried his face in his hands during this *démarche.* He now looked up at them all again, fizzing with laughter.

"Oh my!" he giggled. "Oh what an exposure! My 'peekong little fice'!

Too humiliating! British Major masquerades as female—I knew it would get me into trouble with the police one day."

"What is all this about? Do pull yourself together, Charles," said his sister sharply.

"Homo sum," Charles replied. "Meaning, of course, 'I am the one.' Yes, I will come clean. *Mea maxima culpa."*

This was his story. Nita had rung him up at lunchtime the day he arrived in London. She had been very distressed, and said she must see him alone. He told her he would have to be at the War Office till late in the evening. So it was arranged that he should come to her flat that night, when he had got away from the War Office.

"But why dress up to do it?" asked Nigel.

It seemed that Nita had been terrified lest he should be recognized coming into the house. The caretaker, she had said, was a fearful busybody: she'd spread it around that Nita was receiving gentlemen visitors at midnight.

"I told her that was all nonsense. But the poor girl was in such a state that—well, it suddenly occurred to me that I had my female toilette with me, so why not wear it? Put her mind at ease. Might even cheer her up. So I hared back to Claridge's when my conference was over, and changed and made up and got a taxi to here."

"And did it?" asked Nigel.

"Did it what?"

"Cheer her up?"

"To be quite frank, no. You see, my little job in Germany required me to play the woman's part rather well; otherwise there'd have been no future in it. So, when I got into the rig again, I found myself automatically playing up to it. And this didn't go down madly well with Nita—I mean, she thought I should become myself again when she'd got me safely up in her room here, and I kept lapsing back into Bertha Bodenheim, and in fact the joke fell rather flat. It's not the sort of joke a womanly woman would appreciate, anyway."

"What did she want to see you about?" asked Blount, rather coldly.

"Oh, but surely you can *imagine."* Charles' high, clear voice was uncannily like his sister's as he protested. "Don't you *see?* We had been engaged. She had taken up with Jimmy since—*perfectly* right and proper—but she was terrified that I would assert my claims over her. She wanted to be the first to tell me what had happened, not let the truth come *skulking* out when we all met the next day. And, of course, she wanted to get me on her side—it's too bizarre how naïve women are when—"

"On her side? Against your sister, you mean?" Nigel asked.

"My dear, of *course.* She knew I doted on Alice. She wanted to be forgiven (a) for deserting me, (b) for taking away Alice's husband. Oh yes, we went into the whole thing."

"And did you forgive her?"

"I think I put her mind at rest, poor sweet," said Charles, with a quick, veiled glance at Nigel. "Not that I *approved* of Alice's life being broken up—"

"It wasn't," Mrs. Lake interrupted.

"Well, you know what I mean. Being broken *into,* dear, if you must be pedantic and proud. But, from what she told me, I gathered that the situation was reasonably in hand, the triangle more or less squared. And she was obviously attracted to Jimmy no end. Quite a changed woman—I was astonished."

"Can you enlarge on that a bit?"

"So cozy, my dear, so domesticated. *Quite* a different proposition from what she'd been that year I was working at the Ministry. She talked—how shall I say?—well, like a staid, respectable married woman. Quite *arresting,* the contrast. To tell the honest truth, I found her rather *dull.*"

"Did she talk about divorce at all? The possibility of Mr. and Mrs. Lake being divorced, I mean?" asked Blount.

"No."

"There was nothing in her conversation which could help us?—think carefully, Major Kennington—nothing to suggest there was some other man, or woman, who might have a motive for making away with her?"

"No. I must say I find this 'some *other* man or woman' rather daunting. Meaning my sister and my brother-in-law are the obvious suspects?"

"No, Major Kennington. As you put it that way. Your sister and *you,*" said Blount in level tones. "You two had more cause for jealousy than anyone else, so far as we know yet."

Not a hair of Alice Lake's elegant coiffure appeared to turn at this. She just glanced at her brother, with an ironical twist of her mouth. Charles Kennington studied his finger nails for a moment; then he said, "There are other causes than jealousy, Superintendent, for *crime passionels.*"

"Such as?"

"Oh no, you don't!" replied Charles, with a return to his frivolous manner. "The chief suspect is not going to get himself in deeper by suggesting a few nasty motives for others!"

Alice was scrutinizing him with a puzzled expression. As he said no more, she turned to Blount.

"But surely there's quite a possibility that the wrong cup was poisoned? I mean, that the poison was intended for my husband?"

"There is that possibility. Yes."

"Oh, I see," she said, after a pause, making a little face. "And I had an equal motive for killing him? Jealousy again? The woman scorned? Charles, you were a silly to put temptation in my way."

"What? Oh yes, Stultz' thing. Yes. But how was I to know that publicizing it would lead to?—ah well, it's a lesson. My poor erring sister, I shall accompany you to the scaffold with spiritual consolation. I shall—"

"I don't think this conversation need be prolonged any further," interrupted Blount, sternly. 'You must understand, both of you, that crime is a serious matter. You know my attitude already, Major, towards your bringing that poison container to Mr. Lake's room and then, apparently, forgetting all about it."

"I *know.* It *was* rather distrait of me. I couldn't be more sorry. But all those photographs and things took my mind off it. I find photographs so *entrancing,* you see, and—"

"At the same time," continued Blount, "you and your sister should realize that *everyone* in the room then must be under suspicion. The police are not content with exploring only the obvious motives. I have been frank with you, because you raised the question of obvious suspects yourself."

"Your sentiments do you credit, Superintendent," remarked the irrepressible Charles. "I feel that, under happier circumstances, you and I could get along whizzingly. Well, my pet lamb, we'd better leave the sleuths to their sleuthubrations."

"We shall, of course, have to check both your statements."

"Statements? Oh, to make sure it was I and not Alice who came here that night? Yes, well, Alice's hatlessness should be easily established. And the night porter at Claridge's may remember a seductive female gliding upstairs at about one-thirty A.M.— I had to walk all the way back in my clip-clopping little high-heeled shoes. Or he may not. Wait a minute, though. How silly of me. Did you find a piece of ribbon in the w.p.b.?"

"We did."

"Ah. That saves a lot of trouble. Nita gave me back some old billets-doux of mine. They were tied up with the ribbon. Asked me to take them away and destroy them. So I did. So I must have been here."

"Why take away the letters, yet leave the ribbon?" asked Nigel.

Charles Kennington's features worked themselves into an expression of the most dramatic distaste.

"My *dear!* How *can* you ask? Haven't you *seen* the ribbon? *Magenta!* I could not go about with a piece of *magenta* ribbon—it'd be death to my complexion!"

"Hmm," said Blount, when the pair had departed. "Quite a tough nut, that Mrs. Lake. Smooth customers, both of 'em. Very smooth. Hmm."

"I'm inclined to think he was telling the truth."

"Well, he'd better. His story is easily enough disproved, if—"

"I don't mean about coming here. I'm sure he did. I mean when he said that his sister always tells the truth—believes truth must prevail. I think I must cultivate her society."

"Any other intuitions?" asked Blount ironically.

"One or two odd little turns of phrases. From Charles."

"Ah, you mean when you asked him did he forgive Nita, and he answered, 'I think I put her mind at rest.' "

"That's very perceptive of you, Blount. Yes. It sounds rather sinister now, in cold blood, doesn't it? But I'm thinking chiefly of—well, first a curious word he used about the poison container; and second, his extremely uncharacteristic lack of chattiness on one of the subjects that arose."

Chapter 5

Director: Urgent

Late that night, Nigel Strangeways returned to the Ministry. He had spent a fruitless afternoon; first at Nita Prince's flat, drearily reading through the letters she had kept, which yielded nothing but evidence of her youthful indiscretions; then, with Blount, trying to extract information from Nita's few women friends. It soon became clear that, after she had taken up with Jimmy Lake, she had forsaken her old haunts and become a home girl. The only woman in whom Nita seemed to have confided recently—Miss Sproule, a junior specialist in another division—said that Nita had been worrying about what would happen to her after the war; the Ministry would close down, her opportunities for being with Jimmy would be fewer. There was nothing new here. The director had admitted as much during yesterday's interview with Blount; natural delicacy had no doubt prevented him then from talking about the suggestion of divorce; but he had said that he and Nita were worried about the future. It must be common enough just now in such liaisons, Nigel reflected—war had prevented people looking far ahead or envisaging the consequences of their private actions; there must be many lovers now wondering if their affairs could last beyond the cessation of hostilities, almost dreading the return of peace. Miss Sproule had told them that Nita seemed determined not to relinquish Jimmy, however. "If he's got to choose between us," Nita had said, "I shall see that it's me he chooses."

Nigel entered the great hall of the Ministry. In deference to the man at the reception desk who was supposed to scrutinize all passes, he made a perfunctory gesture towards his breast pocket; but the man was reading a magazine and did not even look up. Nigel marched along the empty, sounding corridor towards the lifts. Presently he was at the top floor. He looked into his own room. No messages for him. He went along to the deputy director's room, and found Harker Fortescue, as usual, at work.

"Lay off it," he said. "Come down to the canteen."

The deputy director's face looked cadaverous in the light of the green-shaded table lamp; hollowed out with exhaustion.

"O.K.," he said. "Ker-rikey, what a day! Let's see if Jimmy will come too."

The director, who was back in his own room now, declined. The police investigation had been interfering with his work all day, he said, and the controller had been nagging at him, and all the efforts of his staff had failed to find the missing Secret file, and there was going to be hell to pay for someone; so they could go and have their midnight feast by themselves.

"He's taking it very hard," said Harker Fortescue as they descended in the lift.

"Well, naturally. After all, Nita—"

"Oh, I don't mean that. Though no doubt he is. But the old boy's been fussing all the afternoon about that file."

"I expect it's a way of taking his mind off what happened yesterday."

"Taking all our minds off it. And just as well," said Harker grimly. "I tell you, Nigel, this is a filthy business. After you—" they emerged from the lift and moved towards the basement canteen—"there's going to be an awful lot of muck turned over before the police get at the truth."

"There is indeed."

"Are you working for them?"

"Well, yes and no. With them, but not necessarily for them."

"Hm. I suppose you know what you mean by that. Damned if I do. Anyway, the thing's a nightmare. I mean, I thought I knew everyone in the division—*knew* none of us could do a thing like that. Now it's happened, one spends half the time telling oneself it couldn't have happened, pinching oneself, finding one is awake after all; and half the time trying to avoid one's colleagues' eyes. Does a man look any different after he's committed a murder? He ought to. But—"

"Don't burble, Hark'ee," Nigel interrupted kindly. "You're overstrained. What you want is a nice plate of Spam and pickles."

The deputy director shuddered strongly, and asked for his usual glass of milk. They went to a corner table in the canteen, which was empty now except for a few teleprinter girls, a handful of messengers yawning over their dominoes, and a press representative or two awaiting the next official handout. The air-conditioning apparatus hummed; the naked electric light glared down on tea urns, counter, metal chairs and tables, metallic perms.

"Fancy calling this place a canteen," mused Hark'ee. "It's more like traveling steerage on a third-class liner bound for hell."

"You're full of fancies tonight."

"Just whiling away the time, old boy, till you start on your third degree."

"Oh, I see. Well, you can begin by telling me what your row with Billson was about."

"Which row was that?" The deputy director's face, under the glaring lights, looked expressionless, a crude map drawn on parchment.

"Two Thursdays ago. During the lunch hour. About Nita Prince. Miss Finlay heard you through the wall." Nigel stuffed another piece of bread and oleo into his mouth. He repeated the words that his assistant had heard. " 'Last chance'—what last chance was he giving you? And why was he 'in a cleft stick'?"

Harker Fortescue's mouth twisted quizzically.

"Your Miss Finlay is a very slapdash type. Why don't you train her better? Always jumping to conclusions and usually the wrong ones."

"In fact you were just having a friendly little romp with Billson?"

"I didn't say that. I merely say we were not talking about Miss Prince."

"But Pamela Finlay heard you—"

"She heard a word which, with her usual inaccuracy, she interpreted as 'Prince.' The word was prints. I was telling him off about the dilatoriness of his unit in supplying photoprints for the production units."

The deputy director was gazing at Nigel, rather in the expectant manner of one who has told a peculiarly subtle joke and is waiting to see if the point of it has been taken. Nigel stared down his nose.

"But, if *you* were telling *him* off, why did he talk about giving you a last chance?"

"My dear old boy, you know what Billson is like, surely? He's a sea lawyer. He's a permanent civil servant. He fights every point, on principle. He refuses to accept responsibility. When I started ticking him off, he came back with a long grievance about the pink forms. He said the system was unworkable. He told me I must reconstruct the procedure—he'd give me this last chance to do so—or he'd apply for transfer to another department. He was quite heated. So was I, I admit. Billson always did get my goat."

"So you told him he could 'go to the dogs' for all you cared? Strong words, Hark'ee."

The deputy director smiled blandly at Nigel.

"I think I really will sack your Miss Finlay. She gets nothing right. What I said was he could go to the *docks.* The Docks Department of the Ministry of War Transport had a vacancy for a finance officer, and that's where he was threatening to transfer. Wish he had. Though God help poor old M.O.W.T., if he did."

"I see. So that explains it." Nigel sighed gently. "How well did you know Nita before the war, when she worked for your agency?"

"I didn't. She only modeled for us occasionally. I never was one for taking models out to dinner. Though I must say she was a whizzer in those days."

"You realize the police will inquire very closely into everyone's relations with Nita? And they'll go back some way into the past?"

"Oh yes. 'Routine inquiries'? I know. Well, my past is a pure white sheet—in that respect. Next?"

"Why do *you* think someone should want to kill Nita?"

Harker Fortescue's cold eyes scrutinized Nigel, unwinking. After a long pause, he said,

"Speaking purely in the abstract, there are three possible reasons for killing a beautiful woman." He held up three fingers, and slowly ticked them off. "One, jealousy. Two, satiety. Three, if she's a certain kind of woman, because she's blackmailing you."

"Do you think Nita was that sort of woman?"

"She was a reformed rake. Reformed, mark you. I take it we're agreed about that? So not blackmail for money. But there are other things for which a woman may blackmail."

"Go on," said Nigel, his pale blue eyes gazing sleepily at the golden, leaf-metal hair of a teleprinter girl at a distant table, who was chattering away to her companions—no doubt discussing the V.P.D. scandal too.

"Security," said Harker Fortescue. "A reformed rake will go to any lengths to defend her reformation—any lengths of emotional blackmail, I mean. She'll cling to respectability as fiercely as a respectable woman will covet what they call romance."

"All this, 'purely in the abstract'?"

The deputy director nodded.

"Well. Very interesting." Nigel sighed again. "And now, while I fetch you another glass of milk, you might be thinking out—purely in the abstract—some slightly less preposterous version of your row with Edgar Billson."

Nigel Strangeways rose and made for the counter, leaving Fortescue goggling at his back. The canteen telephone rang. One of the attendants at the counter answered it.

"Mr. Fortescue? Mr. Fortescue?" she called out in a sing-song voice.

The deputy director strode towards the telephone. The desultory voices in the canteen, which had been hushed for a little, began again. The next moment, Harker was beckoning to Nigel.

"Jimmy! Jimmy! Are you there?" Nigel heard him say.

"What's up?"

"He sounded ill. Damn and blast the exchange, we've been cut off!" Harker jiggled the hook angrily.

"Never mind about that! Quick! Let's get up there!"

Nigel Strangeways sprinted between the tables, Fortescue at his heels. Faces turned stupidly to follow them, like sheeps' faces when a train is passing. Their hurrying feet echoed through the long basement corridor. Nigel stabbed his fingers at the lift button and held it down.

"What did he say?" he asked, as the light panel flickered—six, five, four.

"He just said, 'Hark'ee, is that you? Come'—and then his voice faded away. He sounded bloody queer."

The lift door slid open. They tumbled in. Nigel stubbed the top-floor button. The lift should have gone up, nonstop; but at the ground floor it stopped again: the door slid open, stayed open for the set thirty seconds, then automatically closed. The same happened at the first floor. Harker began to curse. But Nigel pushed him out of the lift, saying urgently,

"Run down to the reception desk! See that no one leaves the building. *No one.* I'll ring for you to go down. Hurry!"

Nigel stayed in the lift. It had come down to the basement without stopping. Now it seemed to be going to stop at every floor. Yes, second floor, stop, pause, door slides open, pause—curse it, that means someone on some floor pressed every button on the outside panel, just before we got into the lift. Someone wants to delay us. The obvious thing to do is to get out and run up the stairs. But perhaps someone wants me to do the obvious thing. Safer not, my boy. Why hasn't this blasted lift got a non-stop master button?

At the next stop, Nigel put his head out and looked upwards. The top floor seemed to be dark. He switched off the electric light in the lift. He did not want to be a sitting target, all lit up, when he got there. I'm as bad as Miss Finlay, he thought; jumping to conclusions; childish; probably Jimmy's just got an attack of indigestion, or cut his finger, or found the missing file. Well, here we are, sixth floor, stop, pause, door opens. . . . He slid quickly through the opening door. Darkness. Damn the dimout, the Japs aren't likely to. . . . His fingers, fumbling along the wall, found the switches, pressed them all down. The passage. Quite familiar. Quite empty. Doors all shut. Walk quietly along it, then. On my left, Brian's door, Merrion's door, my door; on my right the two doors of the Photographs Library. All in order. Now, the anteroom door. Open. On my right, Jimmy's door, shut; a light showing beneath.

Nigel turned the knob and entered. For a moment, his eye naturally going straight to Jimmy's desk, he thought the room unoccupied. But only for a moment. His eye moved to the left. And there, at the table where Nita Prince had died, was Jimmy Lake. What made Nigel catch his breath was that the director seemed to be engaged in prayer. He was kneeling in front of the table, his head buried between his outstretched arms; almost as though he were praying to the ghost of Nita who once had sat there, imploring her to return. Then Nigel noticed the thing sticking out of his back. And the situation became normal again in so far as murder was a normal thing now in this room.

Nigel Strangeways covered the floor in three strides, stood for a moment gazing down at the knife hilt, protruding from Jimmy's back, then took hold of the director and laid him face downwards on the floor. Kneeling, he slipped his hand inside Jimmy's shirt. The heart was still beating. Nigel took up the telephone receiver, which had been lying off its hook beside Jimmy's outstretched hand. He got through to the reception desk and asked for Mr. Fortescue.

"Hark'ee? Nigel here. Listen. You've got to work quick. Jimmy's been attacked: still breathing: knife—went in a bit too high. Ring up the first aid post and tell 'em to send someone up here and to get a doctor *at once.* Then ring A.R.P. control, get Lewis to come up here. You're holding everyone at the reception desk? . . . Good, no one's to go out that way, I repeat no one, not even the Minister. Get hold of whoever's in charge of the messengers tonight—he's to rustle out all his men, take 'em out by the side entrance in Manning Street, and post them round the building outside, as many men on each side as possible, and if they see anyone getting out of a ground floor window, they're to nab him. That side door must be locked again, of course. And I want one man to make sure all the other side doors are locked: if he finds one open, he must report to me at once. Are you with me? Good. Doctor first, remember, and bring him up yourself the moment he comes."

Nigel rang off, took up the outside telephone, and rang Superintendent Blount's home number. The superintendent was just going to bed. Nigel told him what had happened and what steps he had taken. Blount agreed to come at once, picking up a couple of police on the way.

Moving back to the door, Nigel turned off the light switches. The reading lamp on the director's desk went out, as well as the center light on the ceiling. The room was pitch dark. He switched on again, went over to the desk. No signs of disorder, of a struggle. The desk was tidy—

blotter, calendar, pen tray, ink bottle, one tray of papers neatly arranged on its broad surface. He tried the drawers: they were all locked. Straightening up, he moved away towards Nita's table, peering down at the carpet. Presently, between her table and the door, he found a few fresh bloodstains on the carpet and, looking closer, his eye almost level with the floor, faint marks on the carpet as if something had been dragged towards the door. These he covered with newspaper.

At this moment the nurse from the first aid post arrived. She was a calm, sensible woman, and Nigel at once took her into his confidence.

"Mr. Lake has been stabbed. You've got a doctor coming, nurse?"

"Yes. He'll be here in five minutes."

"Good work. Take a look at him, please. He's alive still. Can we do anything for him before the doctor comes?"

The nurse tried the pulse, nodded to Nigel, and made the unconscious man more comfortable.

"There may be some internal bleeding," she said, "but the knife must have missed the heart. He should pull through all right, if the lung is not affected. How did—?"

"No questions now. Oh, there you are, Mr. Lewis—"

The door had opened, and the A.R.P. control officer came in, a small, alert, red-headed man.

"My goodness, what's this? Mr. Lake, is it?" he asked.

"Mr. Lake has been attacked. His assailant *may* be in the building still. Mr. Fortescue is seeing that all the exits are stopped. Got any firewatchers on duty tonight?"

"Sorry, Mr. Strangeways. Only three of us. Since the German war ended, we've cut down—"

"Three will do. You know this building like the back of your hand. I want you to start searching it from top to bottom. Start on this floor and work downward. There'll be some police along presently to help you. Make a list of everyone you find. If anyone acts suspiciously, grab him at once. I'll do the apologizing afterwards, if necessary. And *make* it a search, like a good chap: anywhere a man, or woman, could hide. Do you know Mr. Ingle, Mr. Squires and Mr. Billson of this division, by appearance?"

"Yep."

"And Major Kennington, who used to work in military censorship?"

"Yep."

"If you find any of them, bring him straight along here. Never mind about civil service etiquette; I'll cover you. Got all that?"

"Savvy. I'll use this telephone, if I may and get my chaps up here. Bit of excitement again."

Mr. Lewis and his firewatchers had just left the room to begin their search when the deputy director arrived with the doctor.

"Hm, yes," said the latter, after a brief examination. "Nasty business. He'll do, though, with luck. I'm going to extract this knife first. Nurse, you've got some pads and bandages ready? Good."

"Use my handkerchief, please. Round the handle," said Nigel quickly.

The doctor gave him a curious glance, then took the handkerchief. He and the nurse knelt down beside the body. Harker Fortescue turned his head away. Presently the doctor gave the knife a strong pull. As he did so, and the nurse applied the pads, Jimmy Lake muttered something.

"What was that?" asked Nigel sharply.

The doctor said, "I'm not absolutely certain. Sounded like 'Alice. She won't let me go, darling.' Did *you* hear, nurse?"

"That's what I thought he said, sir."

"Reminds me," Nigel muttered. "Must ring up his wife. Nurse, please tell me anything else he says. It may be vitally important."

Nigel found Jimmy's home number in his address book. Alice Lake answered. She was in bed, but would get out the car and come at once. Oh dear, thought Nigel, I should have done this before. How long since Jimmy telephoned to the canteen? Ten to fifteen minutes. Taking Harker Fortescue aside, he asked him to ring up Major Kennington, Merrion Squires, Brian Ingle and Edgar Billson at their home numbers. The last three, at any rate, lived too far from the Ministry to have been able to get home yet, supposing—

"He's coming round," said the doctor, who had applied restoratives. "No, stand back please, everyone."

Nigel watched the director's bloodless face quiver, his eyes open a little, taking in nothing, close, then open again and survey them in a bewildered way.

"The lights went out," he muttered faintly. "Hello, Nigel old boy."

"Don't talk," said the doctor; and to Nigel, "He mustn't be questioned yet."

"That's all right," said Nigel. "One thing is pretty certain—he never saw his assailant."

"How d'you know that, sir?" the doctor asked, rising from beside his patient and laying a long knife, its handle swathed in Nigel's handkerchief, on the table. Nigel did not answer. He was staring, with consternation in his eyes, at the knife: he drew the handkerchief away from it: yes, it was one of the knives, pointed, thin-bladed, eighteen inches long, used in the art work studio to cut drawing paper—as effective a substitute for a stiletto as a modern assassin could hope to find.

"And now, sir," the doctor was presently saying to Harker Fortescue, "if you've finished with that telephone, I must ring up for an ambulance. Hospital for this gentleman."

"No," said Jimmy, who had been lying with eyes closed. "No. Not hospital. Take me home. Send for Alice."

"But my dear sir—"

"She's on her way, Jimmy," interrupted Nigel. He took the doctor aside, spoke a few words to him urgently.

"No, I cannot take the responsibility. He must have trained attention."

Nigel shrugged his shoulders. Jimmy spoke again, his voice startling Nigel, so much had it resumed its normal, rather tired, infinitely patient, inexorably firm intonations.

"I am *not* going to hospital. So let's have no more of that. Alice, my wife, trained as a nurse. She's perfectly competent. I'm sorry, doctor, but—"

The latter gave him a searching look, then turned away to telephone for the ambulance.

"Well, Hark'ee?" asked Nigel.

"They are all at home, except Merrion."

"Did they answer—in person, I mean?"

"Brian and Charles Kennington did. Billson's wife answered for him, said he'd been in all the evening."

Nigel's brow knitted. He began whistling a dreary little tune between his teeth. Firm steps were heard in the passage: Superintendent Blount, two uniformed policemen and a plain-clothes man behind him.

"T'ck, t'ck, t'ck," he clucked briskly. "How's he doing, doctor?"

"He'll be all right, provided that—"

Jimmy, thinly but firmly, interrupted. "Superintendent, tell this excellent doctor, please, that I am *not* going to hospital."

"Well. Dear me, now," Blount patted his bald head. "An impasse, eh? An impasse?"

"Shall we wait till Mrs. Lake arrives, before deciding?" put in Nigel. He took Blount aside and spoke to him. In a minute, the two uniformed policemen had gone off to assist in the search of the building, while Harker Fortescue was deputed to return to the reception desk and ring back if the net of messengers round the Ministry caught anything; he would also find out from the official at the desk whether he had noticed any other member of the Visual Propaganda Division entering the Ministry earlier that night.

"And now, doctor," said Blount, "I must ask your patient one question."

Brushing aside the doctor's remonstrances, he knelt down beside Jimmy.

"Just this one question, Mr. Lake. Did you see the person who attacked you?"

"No. The lights went out, I tell you."

"Have you any notion who it might be?"

The director's head shook wearily, then rolled to one side.

"He's fainted," exclaimed the doctor angrily. "I must insist that no more—"

"That's all I wish to ask," Blount said; then, turning to Nigel, "You were right. But I don't just see how—"

"I'll explain later. Hello, what's this?"

The red-headed Mr. Lewis had come in, bristling with excitement. He held up a long white over-all coat, which Nigel recognized at once as the type of garment worn by the people in the Art Work Unit. Mr. Lewis tossed it over to him bundled up.

"Found it in the Gents, fifth floor, stuffed down one of the lavatory bowls. Thought you might be interested. Take a look at the right-hand sleeve, Mr. Strangeways."

Nigel shook out the dripping coat. On the cuff a red stain was visible. The stain, when Blount felt it, was still damp; the rest of the cuff, which could not have been immersed, was dry. Blount turned to the inside of the coat collar, put his finger on the label there, pursed his mouth. Over Blount's shoulder, Nigel read on the label, indelibly marked, *M. Squires.*

Blount gave instructions that the search should be continued, with Merrion Squires as its main objective. Five minutes later Mrs. Lake arrived. Jimmy Lake, who was conscious again, gave her a strangely appealing look as she entered—a look, thought Nigel, such as a small boy might give to his mother when he had injured himself in some parentally forbidden exploit; a mixture of pathos and bravado and uncertainty. Alice Lake took it all pretty coolly: no fluster, no flood of tears or questions. Her husband once again insisted that he should be taken home and not to hospital.

"Very well, Jimmy," she said in her high, detached little voice. "If you really want to. And the doctor agrees."

The doctor, now he had met Mrs. Lake, was rather more amenable. After a few words with her, he consented, on condition that he should send a trained nurse in the morning to assist her. The ambulance having just arrived, Jimmy was put on a stretcher and taken away, Mrs. Lake and the doctor following.

Blount and Nigel were alone in the room, the plainclothes man having been sent off to Merrion Squires' lodging to keep an eye on it, supposing he had escaped from the building.

Nigel now gave Blount a fuller account of the evening's work, as far as the known facts went. When he had finished, Blount asked him how he had known that the director never saw his attacker.

"First, because of the lift buttons. Second, because Jimmy was not dead."

"Now go easy with me. It's well after midnight, and it's getting terrible cold in here, and my brain won't function at its best."

"Well then. The fact that the lift buttons were all pressed *after* the lift had got to the basement suggests that the criminal wished to delay us in order to make his own escape."

"Yes, I *can* grasp that," said Blount dryly.

"He would not try to delay us unless he knew we were on our way. After all, he'd not have dared to attack Jimmy at all if he didn't think this floor was unoccupied, as it usually is at that time of night. Now, how could he know someone was going to come up from the basement just then, unless he had heard Jimmy make his telephone call to the basement canteen?"

"So far, so good."

"Right. We have the criminal, *after* he has stabbed Jimmy, hearing Jimmy telephone. The criminal couldn't have been in this room still, or he'd have prevented Jimmy telephoning. But, when he heard him using the telephone, and knew he hadn't succeeded in killing him, why didn't he go back and finish the job properly? The only possible reason is that he was afraid of being recognized. He knew we'd be on our way up. He couldn't be certain that, if he attacked Jimmy a second time, Jimmy might not survive for the minute it would take us to get up here, and give us his name. Besides, of course, he'd left his knife in the body. But, if Jimmy *had* seen and recognized him when he first stabbed him, then it was absolutely imperative that—at whatever risk—he should return here and finish him off before we arrived. But he didn't return and finish him off. Therefore Jimmy had *not* recognized him."

"Q.E.D. Yes, that's—e'eh—vairy ingenious. How do you reconstruct things, then?"

"The criminal opens this door, puts his hand through, switches off the lights, all in a twinkling. One of those switches, by the way, controls Jimmy's desk light. The room is pitch dark. I tried it. Jimmy—you remember him saying just now 'the lights went out'—Jimmy would naturally make for the switches, assuming it was a boyish joke by Hark'ee or someone. The criminal has slipped into the room. He gets behind Jimmy, feels for him, strikes. Then he goes out. There are bloodspots on the carpet there, within a few feet of the door. That's where Jimmy went down. There are also marks of dragging. Under the newspapers there. Jimmy was not quite out. Dragged himself to the switches, turned them on, dragged himself to the nearest telephone, on Nita's table. I suggest that the criminal saw the light under the door, or heard Jimmy moving. Too late to do anything about it, without being recognized. He tears down the passage, slams down the lift buttons, turns out the passage lights—if he hadn't done so on his way in—runs down one flight of stairs, hides his coat in the Gents, and then—" Nigel snapped his fingers.

"And then, presumably, runs down the remaining flights and tries to get out of the building."

"He'd not have time to get past the reception desk before Hark'ee was there."

"Plenty of windows on the ground floor. Your messengers don't move very fast, I've noticed. No, I don't fancy we'll find your Mr. Squires here tonight."

"My Mr. Squires? No. I fancy you won't."

Something in Nigel's tone made Blount glance at him keenly.

"I noticed you kept talking about 'the criminal.' Very correct. I doubt it's not like you to be so correct."

"Well, I ask you—"

"Och, I know what you're going to say," chuckled Blount, "A man doesn't attempt a murder with a knife that can easily be traced to him: and, if he does, he will not leave it in the body for us to find. Nor does he wear a white coat with his name clearly marked on it, to attempt a murder in a dark room where it's the one kind of garment that might make him visible. Nor does he stuff the coat down a lavatory one floor below, carefully arranging that the cuff with his victim's blood on it shall remain above the water. It's all vairy deplorable, oh my, oh my, it is! But then, where is your Mr. Squires? Why isn't he at home in his puir white bed?"

"Blount," pronounced Nigel, "there are times when I come near to misjudging you."

"I'm not so gullible as I look," Blount conceded. "At least, I hope not. Well, we shall know before long—Simpson is going to ring me from Squires' lodgings when he gets there. And in the meantime, I'll take a look round this room."

Curled up in the armchair Blount vacated, his eyes half closed, Nigel watched the superintendent at work, moving solidly, purposefully, from one part of the room to another, shifting the newspapers to peer at the carpet, measuring, making marks with white chalk, taking notes, standing back as if to see the puzzle in perspective, muttering and clucking to himself the while. After a quarter of an hour of this, the very room began to look browbeaten, exhausted and guilty.

"You ought to go on the films, Blount."

"Uh-huh?"

"And everyone in the country be compelled to attend the picture. Prophylactic measures. An awful lot of people would be inoculated against crime forever if they could see one police investigation—the real thing—from beginning to end."

"Crime Doesn't Pay series, eh?"

"No. They're too dramatic, too box-office. It's the slow, tireless, meticulous, cumulative, boring side of an investigation; the spectacle of a stout, fatherly-looking gentleman in a bowler hat leaving not a single pebble on a whole beach unturned; that's what would unnerve any misguided person who was contemplating a felony."

"The professional criminal hasn't that much imagination. He's a stupid fellow, on the whole—a one-track mind."

"But we're not dealing with professionals now. You'll never hear the last of it from Establishments Division if you cut a piece out of that carpet. Has it occurred to you, Blount, that the method of this attack on Jimmy, compared with the last—"

The telephone rang. Blount took up the receiver.

"Yes, Blount here. . . . He's not at his house? Went out at ten twenty-five? . . . Very well, Simpson, wait there till you hear from me."

He turned to Nigel.

"What do we make of this?"

"Search me. Brrh, it *is* cold in this armchair—it must be the dawn wind. One might be sitting on a mountain ledge awaiting the rescuers. *Oh my God!*"

Blount positively started. Nigel was on his feet and had whipped round to face the window behind the armchair. Silently he moved towards it, opened a crack in the curtain and peered through.

"Blount, this window is unlatched. That's where the draft was coming from."

"Well, shut it then," said Blount irritably.

"No. I fancy perhaps there *is* someone sitting on a mountain ledge tonight."

Nigel drew the curtain right back, opened the window wide, put out his head and called into the darkness.

"Merrion! Merrion, you idiot! Hadn't you better come in?"

"Is he there? Can you see him?"

"No. But he used to sit on the ledge, outside his room, when the flying bombs were coming. Blount, go and pull back the curtains and turn on the lights in all the rooms on this side, will you? If he's out there, I'll go after him."

"No, that's my job, Strangeways."

"Please. I know him. He may take some handling."

"Very well, Watch yourself, though."

Nigel was already clambering out of the window. The ledge was at least two feet broad, but the well of darkness beyond made it seem more like two inches. Just as his eyes were growing used to the darkness, and he could see the traffic lights at the corner far below to his left, the light from Harker Fortescue's room sprang out, carving a little bay in the night, making the darkness around it blacker still. Then, the light from his own room, Merrion's, Brian Ingle's. The ledge, floodlit now, seemed deserted. Already one or two angry cries were coming up from the street below; people had been conditioned for so long to the black-out that although it was no longer necessary, they still made their automatic protests. Nigel found himself filled with a quite insensate rage against these busybodies in the street. "Bloody fools," he muttered, and then, keyed up by his rage, began to walk smartly forward along the ledge.

If Merrion was there at all, he must be at the corner of the building, where the ledge stopped. The lights, streaming out from the rooms in between, cut him off from view as effectually as would total darkness. Nigel walked through the successive rays of light, hoping that Merrion—if he were there—had not gone mad; hoping he was not there; yet hoping in a way that he was there, so that his own conjecture might be proved right.

A gust of wind tousled the treetops in the park opposite, and seemed to bounce off the canyon wall of the Ministry, twitching maliciously at Nigel. He was passing Brian Ingle's window. There was the end of the ledge, no figure crouching on it, nothing beyond but a dark drop.

And then Nigel saw, with an odd mixture of fear, relief and irritation, the knuckles white on the coping. He went deliberately to the edge, knelt down and looked over.

He was looking into the upturned face of Merrion Squires, more clownlike than ever, dead pale as if it had been coated all over with liquid white. He was hanging by his hands over an abyss. Far below, the traffic lights flicked from green to red.

"So you *are* here," said Nigel inadequately.

"Don't try and touch me, or I'll let go."

Nigel's accumulated irritability burst inside him.

"All right, let go then, dash your goddamned brains out, it doesn't matter to me," he said furiously.

He could not, if he had pondered conversational gambits for an hour, have hit on a more successful one. The wild look went out of Merrion's frantic, upturned eyes. A sort of resentment took its place.

"That's a nice way to talk to an old friend," he gasped.

"If you don't pull yourself up soon," Nigel remarked coldly, "you'll not be able to."

"Well, who cares? You don't."

"Jimmy has been stabbed, and—"

"Yes, I know that. With my knife. So I'd better take the high jump now, hadn't I?"

"You'd better come up and tell me what you know about it."

The eyes rolled in the chalky clown's face; they were beginning to look mad again. "I don't know anything. I—"

"This is the most ridiculous conversation I've ever had. I'm getting cold and I want to go to bed. Jimmy is not dead; he won't die. *You* will, if you try and stay there much longer. It'll take you about fifteen seconds, after you've let go, to hit the street. You'll be conscious all the time, and it will seem much, much longer than fifteen seconds. And when you do hit the street, you will not necessarily be killed outright. People have fallen greater heights, and survived for some days afterwards, in extreme agony. Why go through all that when neither I nor the police are at all convinced that it was you who attacked Jimmy?"

Merrion Squires, beads of sweat on his face, peered up at Nigel. At last he said,

"D'you swear that, now?"

"Yes."

"All right. Help me up."

Nigel lay down full length on the ledge and took hold of Merrion's wrists. Merrion's feet began to scramble on the smooth wall; his breath came in sobs, "I can't! I've got no strength left! I—"

"Pull, damn you! Don't be such a sniveling baby!"

The insult seemed to brace Merrion. He swore back at Nigel furiously, made a new effort, and scrambled out of the abyss of darkness onto the lighted ledge. There he collapsed for a few moments, sobbing again.

"Are you ready now?" asked Nigel briskly. "We'll have to crawl back to Jimmy's window; the rest are locked inside—"

Merrion Squires interrupted him strangely.

"Nigel, you asked me a question just now."

"Well, *are* you ready? There's no hurry. Take your time—"

"Not that. You asked, 'Why go through all that?' "—his body shuddered convulsively—"I'll tell you. Because I don't know. I don't know whether I stabbed Jimmy or not."

Chapter 6

Mr. Squires: Your Comments, Please

"I know it must look bad, after that shindy I had with the director over my layouts for the Pacific job," said Merrion Squires.

"You don't inevitably attempt to kill the boss just because he ticks you off."

Merrion gave Nigel one of his glancing looks, half challenging, half defensive.

"Ah, but think of the Irish temperament, my boy. Vindictive. Never forgets an injury."

"Well, if you've got a confession to make, you'd better keep it for the superintendent. He'll be here any moment."

Nigel Strangeways rose from the breakfast table and began prowling round Merrion's room. It was eight forty-five on the morning after the attack on Jimmy Lake. When they had got him off the ledge, Merrion had been in no shape for questioning. With Blount's consent, Nigel had accompanied him back to his lodgings in a police car and stayed the night; the plain-clothes man, whom the superintendent had insisted on keeping at his post there, had just been relieved by another as they began breakfast. The search of the Ministry building had disclosed nothing more than an unlatched window on the ground floor—which might mean something or might not; no doubt the police were working on it now.

"I must say, it's very odd to think of you as a detective," Merrion Squires was saying. "I'm not sure I don't prefer your normal role—the stern but just Jehovah of the Editorial Unit. Don't you find it embarrassing having to snoop around your old colleagues?"

"I prefer it myself. On the other hand, I do quite enjoy snooping. Born inquisitive, I suppose. I collect human frailties like Hark'ee collects—now *this* is very nice, a quite enchanting piece of work."

Nigel held up a pencil drawing of Merrion's, with an air of delighted discovery, which effectually concealed the fact that he had already found it earlier this morning, while Merrion was asleep, and Nigel poking about in the magpie litter of his sitting room.

"Did Mrs. Lake sit for this?" he asked.

"Is this the sort of 'human frailty' you collect?" replied Merrion, a sharp edge on his voice.

"Why be so evasive about it? Nothing morally culpable about drawing a head-and-shoulders sketch of a pretty woman, is there?"

After a pause, Merrion said, rather sulkily, "Yes, she did sit for it. I can't draw from memory."

"You know her well?"

"I *have* made a pass or two at her, if that's what you mean."

"I didn't mean it at all. However, as you approach it from that angle—"

"What other angle would you prefer to approach a pretty woman from?"

"—with what results?"

Merrion Squires' evasive glance flickered from Nigel to the portrait he held. He seemed to be making up his mind whether he should take offense or not. Then he gave an exasperated kind of grin.

"Nothing very striking. I did not 'make' her, as you'd put it. A few kisses. She's a very deep, cold little pond, that one."

"A case of deep meeting deep, that must have been. Is she still in love with Jimmy, would you say?"

"I doubt if she could love anyone distractedly, except herself." Merrion was talking seriously now. "No, Jimmy was the peaked and pining lover. Of the two."

"Yes, poor Nita seems to have—"

"Poor Nita, nothing! It's Alice his emotional capital has always been sunk in, my boy; don't you get that wrong."

"He took a queer way of showing it, then," said Nigel, genuinely surprised.

"Ah, don't be so naïve! Nita was a substitute for him—a substitute for the womanly affection and admiration, all the coziness he couldn't get at home. Clever of her to see that's what he wanted. But of course he didn't *really* want it—not in the depths of him. And he was beginning to realize this."

"He did, and he didn't, want it?"

"Yes, my innocent friend. Jimmy's not capable of sustaining a deep, whole-hearted emotional relationship. He's the type that, in the last resort, hates being fully involved. I know. I'm that sort myself. Now Alice never made such demands on him; she gave him room to breathe. That's why I say his emotional capital is sunk in her. He took up with Nita because there's always a hell of dualism in his sort of nature. Part of it wants to lose itself utterly in someone else—wants to defy the other half, which is all for keeping its own integrity and remaining irresponsible. Jimmy's setting up with Nita was the first part of him, making a dash for full emotional responsibility. But the other half would always have been stronger and hauled it back. In fact, it's a wonder Nita lasted so long—great tribute to the girl, when you come to think of it!"

"Did Nita convey all this to you?" asked Nigel, after a meditative pause.

"Oh, glory, no! I was on far from intimate terms with the deceased, I'm glad to say."

" 'Glad'? You've always been very hard on her, haven't you?"

"I see Jimmy's fate, and I says to myself. 'There, but for the grace of God, goes M. Squires.' "

"Well, how do you know all this? Pure reason?"

"Oh no," said Merrion. "Alice told me. Gave me the clue, anyway." His voice became a startling mimicry of Mrs. Lake's high, cool tones—" 'I know he'll regret it. He doesn't like exacting women. He'll find her absolute hell before long, Merrion."

The thought shot across Nigel's mind that, if Merrion and Mrs. Lake were in a conspiracy together, this could be a very subtle maneuver by Merrion to direct suspicion away from them; if they had been in a conspiracy against Nita, that is to say. On the other hand, if Jimmy Lake had been the intended recipient of the poison, why should Merrion admit even a mild degree of intimacy with her? And the fact that a murderous attempt should have been made on Jimmy, so soon after the poisoning, suggested that he had been the real target for the poison too.

Nigel had no time to follow up this thought, for Superintendent Blount and the sergeant were announced. Blount was very businesslike and impersonal this morning. He administered the official warning to Merrion Squires, then asked him to give his account of the previous evening. With a wry glance at the sergeant, who was all set to take down his evidence, Squires began.

His story was that, after lunch on the previous day, he had found on his desk a note from Nigel, asking him to come back to the Ministry at eleven in the evening, as he had some important matters to discuss, and to wait in his room till Nigel turned up. He did so. He must have arrived only a few minutes after Nigel and the deputy director went down to the canteen. No, he had not seen any other member of the division when he came in. About ten or fifteen minutes later—Merrion could not be at all sure—he had heard feet running past his door towards the staircase, and a moment afterwards he could see through the transom over the door that the passage lights had gone out. He left his room to investigate, and was attracted by a queer sound from the director's room. He went in and found Jimmy Lake very much as Nigel had found him, kneeling before Nita's desk, his body sprawled over it. Protruding from Jimmy's back was the hilt of a knife which Merrion recognized as his own, or one of the same pattern. He assumed Jimmy to be dead. But he was approaching the body to make sure, when he heard the whine of the lift ascending, heard the lift door opening and feet coming down the passage. He was trapped in the room, with a body which had apparently been stabbed by his own knife. There was nothing for it but to scramble out of the window, push the window to from outside, and hide on the ledge, awaiting events.

"I lost my head, of course," he concluded. "If I'd had any sense, I'd have pulled out the knife and taken it with me."

"It's extremely lucky for you that you didn't," said Nigel—a remark which earned him a nasty look from Blount.

"I take it you wrote no such note to Mr. Squires?" the superintendent asked Nigel, who shook his head. "What did you do with the note?"

"Scrumpled it up and put it in my pocket. Here it is," said Merrion Squires.

"Ah. Typed. I see it's got your initials, Mr. Strangeways."

"That's easy," said Nigel, looking at the typewritten sheet over Blount's shoulder. "We all initial everything in the civil service. Including the attendance book. Nothing simpler than to forge someone's initials when you're seeing them every day on odd bits of paper."

Blount took Merrion Squires over his story again, asking a number of innocent-seeming questions, which would have been dynamite if the story had been fabricated. But he could not shake Squires at all. In spite of that sliding eye, which often prepossessed one to doubt Merrion's veracity, he did seem to be telling the truth now.

"Was it generally known in the division that Mr. Lake would be working late last night?"

"I couldn't say. I didn't know myself. He often did, of course," replied Squires.

"And the deputy director? You see what I'm trying to get at, Mr. Squires? If your statement is correct, or for that matter, if it is not, I have to ask myself how the criminal could rely on finding Mr. Lake in his room, yet be sure there'd be no one else about the place."

"There I can't help you. Not being the criminal, as it so happens," replied Merrion Squires.

"Hark'ee—the D.D.—is very regular in his habits. He always goes down to the canteen about eleven o'clock when he's working late," put in

Nigel. "And presumably the criminal had made sure, somehow or other, that Jimmy would be on the spot. Made an appointment with him, perhaps."

"If *that* is so, we shall know soon enough who it was. I'm going to see Mr. Lake this afternoon. The doctor says he is fit to be interviewed." Blount held Squires with a steely look.

"No, you won't bounce me *that* way," said Merrion, flushing. "If I stabbed Jimmy, it was quite unpremeditated, I assure you. Nothing was further from my mind when I came to the Ministry last night." He held up a hand to check the question Blount was about to ask. "And, if I may make my modest contribution to human knowledge, the obvious thing for *X* to have done was to wait in the Photographs Library—its door is directly opposite the director's anteroom—wait there in the dark, with the door slightly open, till he'd seen Hark'ee depart for his nightly orgy in the canteen, and then slide into Jimmy's room."

"Just so, Mr. Squires. Did you miss your white coat when you went in to your own room last night?"

"No. Didn't notice it was gone. I was feeling rather dreamy."

"So dreamy that you aren't sure whether you attacked Mr. Lake or not?" Blount put all his weight and impetus behind the question, like a Rugby forward charging into a loose formation.

Merrion Squires was silent. His eye roved uneasily over the magpie litter of his room, the books higgledy-piggledy in their shelves, the guitar leaning in a corner, the pencil and wash studies pinned to the walls, the floor scattered with magazines and shoes and artists' materials, as though seeking from them advice or support.

"Come now, Mr. Squires," said Blount peremptorily. "You told Mr. Strangeways last night—this morning, I should say—that you didn't know whether you'd stabbed Mr. Lake or not. You have just now repeated something in the same sense. Surely it must be clear to you that—"

"All right, all right. Don't nag. Yes, I suppose you'd better know the worst. Are you acquainted with the word 'schizophrenia,' by any chance, Superintendent?"

"We hear it quite often in the courts," replied Blount icily. "From the lips of counsel for the defense."

"You remember the coat-slitting epidemic in the Ministry last winter, Nigel?"

"Yes."

"Well, you see in me Jack-the-Coat-Ripper."

The epidemic had caused a brief sensation in the Ministry. Several of the women in the Visual Propaganda Division, to which the outbreak was confined, had found their coats hanging in their rooms slit from collar to hem. This wanton, malicious damage was naturally even more unpopular at a time when coupons were so short; and an ugly spirit of suspicion had spread, trembling on the edge of panic and very nearly pushed over it by Miss Finlay's tactless remark that "one of these fine days someone will be inside a coat when it's slashed." The outbreak ended as suddenly and mysteriously as it had begun, Miss Prince's coat being the last to suffer. No clue to the perpetrator was found. There had been a strange epilogue a fortnight later, though, each of the three victims finding on her desk an envelope containing money and coupons enough to purchase a new coat.

Merrion Squires, looking sick with self-disgust, his hands trembling on the back of the chair he was sitting in his usual equestrian pose, now revealed that he had been the cause of it all. He had had no idea that he was the culprit, he said, until a member of the staff had caught him at work, the knife in his hand.

"It was as if I'd been sleepwalking, and someone had waked me up. I mean, I had no idea what I was doing in the room, with a knife. The last I remembered was sitting at my own desk working on some rough layouts. But *there* was the knife, and *there* was the coat, all mutilated. It was a pretty nasty awakening, I can tell you."

Merrion went on to say that he supposed the flying bomb, which had blown him off the ledge, must have created something equivalent to a geological fault in his unconscious. However, the countershock of being discovered in the act seemed to have reestablished equilibrium. Or so he had hoped, since there were no further cases of coat slitting, until last night brought the whole nightmare down on him again.

"You can imagine what I felt like. In the same room. Staring at the same knife. But this time there *was* a person inside the coat. And I'd felt sleepy while I was sitting in my own room, waiting for Nigel to turn up. Oh God, I don't know yet! Did Mr. Hyde take control again?"

Merrion Squires buried his head in his hands. The superintendent asked, in a kinder voice than he had used so far, "And who was it that discovered you that time? Miss Prince, I take it?"

"Oh no. It was Billson."

Blount and Nigel exchanged questioning glances.

"Billson? But I'd have thought he was the type who'd have reported it at once," said Blount.

"So did I. But our Edgar turned out to be quite an opportunist. Or quite human, if you like to put it that way."

According to Merrion, Billson had promised him that the matter should go no further if he made restitution. He offered to make up the required number of coupons, as Merrion had not nearly enough. Billson was even so kind as to propose if Merrion gave him the money in £1 notes, to put it with the coupons into three envelopes and place them on the desks of the three victims himself, so that there should be no doubt that the full price of a new coat was in fact given to each.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Nigel. "This is new light on Billson."

"Yes indeed. I found it most illuminating. But I must say, for a finance officer, his simple division of money was a bit faulty."

"Oh?"

"He asked me for £200. Each of the girls found £25 in her envelope. Actually, £25 was adequate for buying a new coat. But £125 seemed to me rather heavy as an agent's fee."

"But that was pure blackmail!" Blount exploded.

"You bet your life it was. But what could I do? Even if I'd been willing for the coat-slitting story to come out, I couldn't have proved blackmail against Billson. It was a remarkably cunning arrangement on his part. In fact, I suppose I'm very ingenuous in some ways; but, when he asked for the £200, I genuinely believed he was going to divide the whole sum between the three girls—you know, give them more than double the value of their coats as a sort of sweetener."

"But—but Mr. Billson is a permanent civil servant," said Blount.

"And therefore incorruptible? I know. I can't expect you to believe my story. And I've no way of proving it."

"Has he attempted to get money from you since?"

"As a matter of fact, he has. Last week. He didn't get it though. You see, it suddenly occurred to me that, although I couldn't prove blackmail against him, it was equally impossible for *him* to prove that it was I who had slashed the coats. It would be his word against mine, in either case."

"May we go back to the coat slitting a moment?" asked Nigel. "Have you any idea why you slit those particular coats and not any other ones?"

Merrion Squires' hands began to shake again, his eyes to slip and slide restlessly over his room.

"They were all three rather pretty girls, you remember," he said at last, forcing the words out painfully. "And—oh, to hell with it!—let's put it that, not long before, I'd had a row with Nita; she rejected my advances, as they say. And the others—" he shrugged his shoulders significantly. "But you see—" the words came tumbling out now—"you see why I was in such a stew last night? A couple of days ago, as you know, Nigel, I had a row *with Jimmy. . . .*"

* * *

Ten minutes later, Nigel and Blount were speeding in a police car toward Pinner, where Edgar Billson's home was. An idea had been forming in Nigel's mind, during the interview with Squires, and he wished to test it.

"What did you think of all that?" he asked.

"Well now. Vairy specious. May be true. We can't prove it, of course. Billson wouldn't be likely to confess." Blount's eyes glittered behind the steel-rimmed glasses. "But supposing it isn't true. Suppose it was not Billson but Nita Prince who caught him in the act of slashing her coat. Suppose it was she who had him in her power, perhaps blackmailing him. Now *there's* a possible motive for the murder of Miss Prince. And it might be that Squires found afterwards she had betrayed his secret to the director. So Mr. Lake has to go, too. If that were the truth of it, the whole of Squires' story would be a vairy ingenious plan to draw us away from the danger area—from his hidden motive for poisoning the girl."

"That's sound enough, up to a point. And I must admit, before you came along, he'd been saying things which could be interpreted as an attempt to throw suspicion for Nita's death on someone else." Nigel gave Blount a résumé of the conversation. "But," he went on, "if Merrion is the criminal, why, why, why should he confess to having had a row with Nita before the last coat-slashing incident? The rest of his confession tended to isolate the attack on Jimmy—whether Merrion actually did it or not. But, as soon as he volunteered of his own free will, that a row with Nita—her rejecting his advances—might have been his unconscious motive for slashing her coat—why, he walks straight into what you call the danger area; he links up the attack on Jimmy with the murder of Nita."

"I think he's a bit daft, your Mr. Squires. I don't like his eyes. Slippery."

"Well, there's this to be said for him, poisoners usually stick to the same weapon."

"But this case is different. There was but the one poison container. Supplied free and gratis by that nincompoop, Kennington. It just so happened to be handy. Like Squires' knife happened to be handy last night. And you could say Squires was well advised just now to feed us with schizophrenia. And you could argue that, having been a genuine victim of it when he slashed the coats, he would use that method on Mr. Lake with the assurance that his defense was already established supposing he was caught."

"Why didn't he use the same method on Nita, then? By the way, talking of poison containers," whispered Nigel, "I see you've got a new sergeant."

Blount looked his grimmest.

"Yes. Sergeant Messer is going back into uniform. I will not stand for carelessness."

"He didn't search 'em properly?"

"He omitted to examine carefully some of the possible places of concealment—bodily concealment," replied Blount primly.

"But, damn it, we were all in the room. No one undressed. How could anyone have concealed the thing that way?"

"So Messer reasoned. But it wasn't his job to reason. Anyway, you don't have to undress in order to put a thing in your mouth."

"No one would be crazy enough to put the poison container in his mouth, surely? Why, there might well have been some drops of poison left in it. And anyway, the fumes—"

"That is all quite true. Nevertheless, Messer fell down on his job."

"What about your woman searcher?"

"She was thorough."

"Hmm. Well, I still *cannot* understand why the criminal should have bothered to remove the container, however he did it, at such a risk of discovery, when he need only have dropped it on the floor, or—"

"Maybe he was afraid it'd take fingerprints."

"A tiny thing like that?"

"The identity of a criminal has been reconstructed from a mere fragment of a fingerprint before now, thanks to photomicrography. Not that our suspects are likely to know this—they're amateurs, after all."

"All except one, Blount," said Nigel slowly. "I should think there's nothing Charles Kennington doesn't know about—well, concealment. And subterfuge. And throwing dust in eyes. He did catch Stultz, after all."

"There's no use beating our heads against that wall just now. When we get to Billson's house, I propose—"

The superintendent outlined his plan. . . .

Mrs. Billson was dusting the front parlor when the bell rang. Drawing aside the muslin curtain, she peered out sidelong. A fat gentleman in a bowler hat and a blue suit; a tall gentleman, hatless, with tow-colored hair. Couldn't be commercials—they didn't go about in pairs. She hastily slipped off her flowered apron, bundled it behind the sofa, patted her graying frizzy hair, and went to the door. Might as well face it. If it wasn't now, it'd be later. Did you have to feed duns, bailiffs, whatever they were called, when they encamped in your house? she wondered distractedly.

"Good morning, gentlemen. If you've come about that account at Schoolbridge's, I can assure you Mr. Billson will be sending a check very shortly."

"Madam, I think there must be some mistake. I am a police officer, and I would like a word with you. May we come in?" Blount held out his official card.

Mrs. Billson hardly looked at it. Oh dear, she thought, now I've given it away, and Edgar will be furious. Why did I blurt it out?

"Of course. Please step inside. Pardon the untidiness—one can't get a maid nowadays for love or money," she said in accents so refined that Nigel's teeth were positively set on edge.

"Now, madam, it is rather a grave matter—no, I will stand, thank you—but I hope you may be able to clear it up satisfactorily."

"I can assure you, I—" Blount held up a hand which, of the flustered woman, seemed as large as doom.

"If you will allow me. Last night we arrested a pickpocket. He was found to be in possession, amongst other things, of a wallet we believe may belong to your husband. The man admitted to having just stolen it—"

"Oh dear, Edgar didn't say anything about—"

"Now, it has been brought to my attention that, later last night, an officer of the Ministry of Morale rang up this house, and was told by you that your husband had been at home all the evening. You will appreciate, madam, that this puts the police in an awkward position. We should wish to restore Mr. Billson's wallet. On the other hand, how could it have been stolen from him, some distance from here, if he was at home all the time?"

"Oh, I can explain that. Edgar—Mr. Billson, that is—doesn't care for the Ministry gentlemen to know that he goes to the sta—"

"Has an occasional flutter at the dogs, eh?" Blount beamed upon her like an appeased shark. "Quite understandable. One has to be careful in the civil service, naturally. So he asked you to say he was in all the evening, if anyone rang up. Had he in fact returned home when Mr. Fortescue telephoned?"

"No. He got back about half an hour later. He had stopped at a friend's house on the way."

"Quite, quite. I'm glad we've cleared that up. Can't afford to lose wallets these days, eh? What stadium was he at, by the way?"

"Harringay, he said he was going to."

"Hope he made a haul."

"Well, I couldn't say, I'm sure. I was in bed when he got back. We—hem—have separate rooms. And this morning he overslept, and had to dash off to work without hardly touching his breakfast, so I scarcely had a word with him."

"I only hope, for your sake, we're right about Billson," said Nigel, as the police car tore back towards central London. "Or else he'll raise an almighty stink about that interview with his wife."

"Let him try. Did you notice, Strangeways, his wife took us for duns at first? It all fits in."

"Yes. And it does seem to strengthen Merrion's story. If Billson has been playing the dogs and getting into debt, that would account for his taking the £125 off Merrion instead of reporting him to the authorities. No doubt he got the extra coupons off some shady blackmarket friend. Well, it quite revives my spirits to know that the correct Billson has been leading a double life."

Blount looked worried. "But it doesn't account for his attempting to murder Mr. Lake."

"You think it was he?"

"I've an open mind. We want more facts yet. But I'll grant you this—if Mr. Squires was telling the truth, the man most likely to have made the attack on Mr. Lake is the man who knew that Squires was behind the coat slashing, and who therefore would use Squires' coat and knife in an attempt to frame him. But why should Billson try to kill Mr. Lake? Suppose Lake *had* found out about his debts and his dog or racing—you don't kill a man for that, not even in the civil service. After all, it wouldn't prevent Billson's creditors coming down on him."

"Blount, I have an idea. It's been taking shape for some time. Listen."

As Nigel unfolded his theory, the superintendent's face began to light up as briskly as a technicolor dawn. At one point he even went so far as to remove his bowler hat in order to slap his bald head—a sign of excitement now, not of perplexity.

"Ah well now, well now! That's vairy interesting, vairy suggestive. Let's hope Mr. Lake is in a fit state to corroborate. Now supposing he does—"

They began to lay their plans. Here, Nigel's inside knowledge of Ministry procedure proved useful. It was agreed that there should be no questioning about the events of last night, beyond a formal routine inquiry by Blount into the movements of each of the suspects, ostensibly to confirm the alibis which Fortescue's telephone calls had given them. The problem of lulling Billson's suspicions was a difficult one. It was decided that Blount should take the offensive about his last night's alibi, for Billson's wife would almost certainly telephone to him about the police visit; Billson would then, presumably, fall back upon his second line of defense—that he had been at the stadium; this alibi Bount would, subject to the usual checking, be apparently prepared to accept. If Billson had any lingering doubts, they should be dispelled by what would happen later in the afternoon.

On their arrival at the Ministry, Nigel went straight to the deputy director's room. He noticed a policeman sitting stolidly upright outside the director's door, an object of some giggling and eyelash-fluttering on the part of the typists in the anteroom. Nigel asked Fortescue if he would send his secretary away for five or ten minutes—he had some private words for him. When this was done, Nigel lay back in the armchair and began.

"Hark'ee, we want some co-operation from you. You must call an emergency progress meeting for this afternoon. No trouble about that, with Jimmy *hors de combat*—reassignment of work, and so forth."

"To say nothing of the head of the editorial section waltzing around with policemen when he should be—"

"Keeping his fingers on the strings, to prevent bottlenecks. I know. In the course of this meeting, you must say two things. First, that an arrest for the attempted murder of the director may take place any moment; and you've been assured by the superintendent that, as soon as it does, the police will all be removed from the building and we can get on with our war effort unimpeded."

"Is this true?"

"In a way. The second thing is, you must give out that, first thing tomorrow, there's going to be a check of the Q photograph files."

Harker Fortescue's cold and fishy eye lit up with something near to animation. He stroked the side of his chin. He opened a drawer, took out a packet of cigarettes, flipped one across to Nigel and lit his own—or rather tried to light it; but his lighter seemed recalcitrant, and in the end Nigel had to supply a match.

"What's the idea of that?" he asked at last. "One of your subtle maneuvers?"

"Yes and no. A check of the Q files certainly must take place as soon as possible."

"But, damn it, man, not now. The division is under-staffed as it is; and if you're dragging off one of us this evening for Jimmy's—"

"You've only got to *announce* the check. At present. It may be that M.I.5 will *do* it for you."

The deputy director eyed Nigel thoughtfully.

"Oh, it's like that, is it? Well, I wish them luck. You know that PHQ secret file Jimmy has been fussed about? It's still missing. And it contains the complete list—the *only* complete list—of the QW tray of canned photographs. They can't very well check them without it."

"Yes, I know that. You must say that the file has been found."

Seeing Hark'ee still looked rather unco-operative, Nigel added,

"We're seeing Jimmy this afternoon, early. If necessary I shall ask him for a chit requesting you to check the Q files tomorrow morning."

"My dear Nigel, there's no need to jump me like this. Of course I'll announce it. I'd be glad to have a note from Jimmy about it, though. I take it he's on the road to recovery then?"

"Yes."

Jimmy Lake was lying in bed, his shoulder heavily bandaged, his face still as pale as the bandages, but evidently in full possession of his senses, when Blount and Nigel turned up at his house. The nurse said they might have fifteen minutes' conversation with him, and left the room with a brisk glance at her wrist watch. Alice Lake was sitting at the bedside. Blount first asked the director to tell him what had happened the previous night. Jimmy said he had not made an appointment with anyone to see him then. When the door had opened, he had not looked up instantly (this, Nigel could well imagine: when Jimmy was deep in a piece of work, you could often come into the room, sit down and light a cigarette before he looked up to see who it was). The next instant, said Jimmy, the lights had gone out. He sat still for a few moments, supposing it to be Hark'ee back from the canteen. He said something like "Turn 'em on again, you silly ass." Nothing happened. So he got up and moved over to the switches. Yes, he had thought there was someone in the room, but still assumed it to be Hark'ee. When he was near the door, he felt a hand fall on his shoulder from behind. Then the blow came, pitching him forward on to the floor. He was dimly aware of someone gliding out of the room, shutting the door behind him. He did not call out, for fear his assailant might return, but dragged himself to the door, turned on the lights and then managed to get Hark'ee on the telephone before he passed out.

All this seemed to fit in with Nigel's reconstruction of the scene. But Blount's further questions proved that Jimmy could give no clue at all to the identity of his assailant; and there was the awkward though not unexpected fact that he had made no appointment to see anyone that night. How could the attacker have relied on his being there? This was easily answered. Both Brian Ingle and Edgar Billson had rung him up in the afternoon, asking to see him about certain jobs of theirs he had on his desk for approval. He had told them both that he hadn't dealt with them yet, but hoped to get them done that night and have them ready in the morning.

Nigel studied the director's face while he gave this evidence. Jimmy Lake looked innocent, defenseless, irresponsible, as people do lying in bed. The square, handsome head; the voice weak, but collected; the familiar mannerism of running his tongue round against the inside of his lips before he spoke, as though it were an aid to deliberation: all this was unchanged. Yet Nigel seemed to perceive an unwonted air of anxiety behind it. Jimmy Lake, he obscurely felt, was straining to catch some implication from the superintendent's questions at the same time as he answered them at their face value. From time to time Jimmy's eyes turned to his wife; and then a different sort of anxiety seemed to come into them. It was as though he were in a dream, trying to grope his way to her, but unable to reach her, thought Nigel. Alice Lake, for her part, was cool and quiet as ever. Her husband's condition, so frail and appealing, did not modify her air of detachment. She sat at his bedside more like a nurse than a wife. When his right hand went out to her affectionately, Nigel almost expected her to take his pulse.

Blount was now asking about the missing Secret file. Nigel had already explained to the superintendent the general procedure of the PHQ files. Throughout the war, photographs from every theater of operations, at home and abroad, poured into the Ministry. Every photograph was submitted to the appropriate censor—naval, military or air; if necessary, to all three. All photographs passed by the censors were filed and indexed under subject headings in the Photographs Library, whence they could be issued to the press or drawn upon for the Ministry's own productions. Any photograph stopped by the censors was put away with its negative, in a special department of the library. These stopped, or "canned" photographs were the subject of the PHQ files. Each file contained a list of canned pictures numbered, indexed and keyed to the number of the trays in Q department where negatives and specimen prints were put away, together with a brief note on their subject, date of receipt, date of censorship, etc., and any inside correspondence about them. Such photographs had usually been censored on security grounds; it might be that a picture gave away information about the position of an unexploded bomb in London, or of bomb damage, or the number of a ship or the shoulder flash of a division, or some secret apparatus such as radiolocation.

It sometimes happened that these canned photographs were more dramatic, or of better quality, than the sets on any given subject released for general publicity purposes. And it could also happen that the original reason for their being stopped was no longer valid. So it was the custom of Nigel's Editorial Unit, when collecting photographic material for a new production, to examine the Q files for any relevant pictures; and, if an exceptionally good photograph was found there, he would resubmit it to censorship. A year ago, browsing through the Q files, he had made a note of a most sensational picture, Q5339, taken in the Pacific theater. When he had recently got to work on his new production in the Pacific series, he had remembered this photograph and put through an order for six rough prints, in the hope that the censors might now be prevailed upon to release it. This was the picture which had caused his row with Billson on the morning of Nita Prince's death.

Now Nigel was painfully aware that, if the Secret file relevant to any group of canned photographs were missing, it would be extremely difficult, if not quite impossible, to check the originals. Each group of prints, it is true, was numbered in serial order. But, very occasionally, a print proved to be too dangerously revealing to be kept even in the locked files of Q department, and the censor requested that it should be destroyed, together with its negative. In the absence, then, of the relevant Q file, it would be very difficult to prove that a given photograph had not been thus destroyed; and, but for Nigel's having taken a note of Q5339, there would have been nothing to indicate that this photograph and negative were in existence a year ago, and therefore had not been destroyed by official request.

Nigel, it now transpired, was not the only person who had worried about this. On the day of Nita Prince's death, file PHQ14/150 had been sent up to the director from the Registry, but had never reached him. He had sent for it, he said, that morning, wishing to discuss with Merrion Squires some changes in the layout for the Pacific job and hoping that the list of canned photographs in the file might give them some ideas for new material. The Ministry's investigations officer had traced the file as far as the In tray in the director's anteroom. A messenger had placed it there—he remembered it because of the red SECRET tab on the envelope—just before eleven o'clock, when the senior officers of the division were assembling in Jimmy's room to greet Charles Kennington. From that point, it had been seen no more. It was unlikely that it could have been abstracted after the party had assembled, for a typist was in the anteroom all the morning from then on, and she protested stoutly that she would have noticed anyone tampering with the In tray. But there had been a period of five minutes, just after eleven o'clock, when she had left the anteroom.

Jimmy Lake had been too preoccupied the rest of that day to draw conclusions. The following day, however, he remembered how Charles Kennington had asked Nita to invite Edgar Billson to the party. This had been just after eleven o'clock, when the rest of them had already met in Jimmy's room. Theoretically, it would have been possible for Billson to take the file from the In tray then and conceal it in his room, without being seen, before coming to the party. At Jimmy's suggestion, the investigations officer had been making inquiries round the division, with a view to testing this theory, during yesterday—the very day when the director was attacked. Jimmy remembered, as did Nigel, how less than an hour before Nita's death, Jimmy had asked her to ring Mr. Billson and tell him that he must supply within twenty-four hours the QW prints requested by the Editorial Unit, over which he had been so queerly obstructive. Did all this link up, the director wondered. Had Billson somehow lost the negatives in question? Or had they been damaged? How else could one account for his recalcitrance over providing prints from them, or his making away with the PHQ file—supposing it was he who had done so?

Jimmy now agreed that all the Q files must certainly be examined the following morning, and scribbled a note to the deputy director, instructing him to get this under way, signing it with his initials.

"And now, Mr. Lake," said Blount, "that nurse of yours will be turning us out any moment. But I must ask you one more question. You spoke of these photographs as having been lost perhaps, or damaged. Did no other possibility enter your head?"

Jimmy frowned. An expression of anguish came over his face.

"I cannot believe that any member of my division would—"

"It is vairy painful for you, sir. Don't think I don't appreciate that. But those photographs, or their negatives, might have been of the utmost value to any enemy power. And—e'eh—let us suppose that the poison Miss Prince took was intended for you, as the knife certainly was—you see, what a motive we have now for the criminal?—a man will go to great lengths to protect himself from a charge of high treason, Mr. Lake."

Chapter 7

From: Mr. Billson
To: Deputy Director

The progress meeting was in full blast. Sitting at his desk, the deputy director ran his finger down to the next item on the production schedule.

"This job seems to be very sticky," he said. "Went to the studio on the twentieth of last month, and we still haven't got an approved layout. It's a scandal, Merrion."

"The director didn't like two of my double spreads," said Merrion Squires, sitting astride his chair and contemplating Hark'ee ruminatively over the back of it. "So he threw the job back to me, and I've been trying to find some new pictures."

"It's absolutely scandalous. Here's a job in a standard format—no technical difficulties about it. The Admiralty are clamoring for it. And you talk to me about new pictures. What about the captions?"

"Oh, they're d-done," stammered Brian Ingle eagerly. "And Nigel has p-passed them. All except for those two openings, I mean."

"Finance?"

"That's cleared," said Mr. Oddie, the officer who was responsible for printing costs.

"Well, there seems to be only one bottleneck. In the Art Work Unit. Let me see, delivery is scheduled for the thirty-first of August. And it's now—my word, we'll have to get going! The controller gave priority A for this job, and it's got to be delivered on schedule. That's basic. Nigel, you're supposed to push the work through every stage quickly," he rapped out at the apparently unconscious figure in the deep leather armchair, Miss Finlay busily taking notes by its side.

"We've been held up by Photographs Library. I ordered some new pictures for Merrion over a week ago. One of them, from the Q files, hasn't turned up yet. Billson's girls have lost it, I suspect."

"I take exception to that remark," said Mr. Billson frigidly, his pasty face set in an expression not unfamiliar to his colleagues. "I queried with Mr. Strangeways the necessity of supplying *six* prints of the photograph in question. It is a matter of principle. Mr. Strangeways does not seem to grasp, even after five years' experience of civil service procedure, the necessity for economy. I am responsible to the Treasury for—"

"Yes, we know all that," interrupted Harker Fortescue. "I also know this is a rush job and the budget won't unbalance itself if a few extra prints of one photograph are made. What did you want them for, Nigel?"

"Submission simultaneously to the three service censors."

"Very well. Let him have them double-quick, Billson."

"Mayor cuts red tape," murmured Merrion Squires, very audibly.

Edgar Billson gave the deputy director a queer look. "Are those definitely your instructions? Six prints of Q5339?" There was some undertone in his voice which Nigel could not interpret.

"Yes," snapped Hark'ee. "And while we're on the subject of the Q files, they are to be checked tomorrow morning, Billson."

"Oh no, I'm afraid that's out of the question. Several of my staff are away on leave, and I can't waste my time just now with routine checks." Billson's white face looked as obstinate as a mass of dough that refuses to rise.

"Can't help that," said Hark'ee. "I've a note from the director giving firm instructions. Like to see it?"

He passed the piece of paper to Edgar Billson, who took off his glasses and wiped them before reading it.

"I cannot accept this," he said at last. "I must come back at the director with a firm request for postponement on the score of—h'rrm—lack of staff facilities."

"Oh God, now we're off!" came another stage whisper from Merrion.

"I'm sorry. It's got to be done," said the deputy director coldly. "So there's an end of it. The missing PHQ file has been recovered, by the way. And it's not a routine check, Billson. I understand that a representative of M.I.5 may be present."

Nigel opened his eyes wide. He had not intended Hark'ee to come out with this extra piece of bait; but, seeing the consternation on Billson's face, he was quite glad of it. A little hum of surprise and interest had started in the room, soon silenced by Hark'ee saying,

"Well that's the lot, as far as the production schedule goes. We'll turn now to the Commissions Pending sheet. Where's my sheet, chump?" he called to his secretary at the far table. While she was taking it out from a folder, Hark'ee went on:

"Commissions Pending. Yes. I'm afraid, in the director's absence—you'll be glad to hear he's out of danger, but he'll not be back for a week or so—some work will have to be redistributed. And there's another thing. The police inform me that they will be making an arrest any moment now for the attempted murder of Jimmy. Let us hope," said Hark'ee bleakly, "it isn't one of our number. If it is, we shall be still more short-handed. On the other hand, the superintendent promises to withdraw his men from the building as soon as this arrest has been made; so at least those of us who *are* left will be able to get on with our work in peace."

There was a shocked silence in the room. At last, Brian Ingle said,

"Does that mean that—that, well, N-Nita's death will be cleared up at the same time? Was it the same p-person who did it, I mean?"

"Couldn't say. I'm not that far in the confidence of the police. Now, item 368 on the sheet," Hark'ee announced, in the manner of a parson giving out the number of a hymn.

" 'Lead us, heavenly father, lead us,' " murmured Merrion Squires.

The meeting got down to the discussion of work commissioned by other departments but not yet at the stage of production. They were engaged on it ten minutes later, when Superintendent Blount came in, a uniformed sergeant behind him. He advanced formidably to Hark'ee's desk, bent over, murmured a few words in his ear. Hark'ee was seen to nod. Blount turned to the rest of them.

"I must ask you to come with me, Mr. Squires," he said.

Watching Edgar Billson covertly, Nigel saw his body relax and beads of sweat starting from his forehead. No one spoke. They might have been the guests at the feast when Perseus flashed the Gorgon's head at them. Merrion Squires cast one look of infinite reproach upon Nigel; then, without a word, strode to the door, Blount at one elbow, the sergeant at the other.

The deputy director raised his eyebrows interrogatively at Nigel.

"Yes," Nigel said, "I'm afraid so."

"I think, ladies and gentlemen, we'll end this meeting," said Hark'ee.

As he went out, Nigel looked round. The deputy director's head was buried in his hands.

Five hours later, at ten o'clock that night, Blount and Nigel were sitting in the latter's room at the Ministry. They were sitting in the dark and speaking in whispers. Blount had removed the disguise he had used to enter the building again undetected by any eyes that might be on the lookout for him. The door was slightly ajar, so that they could hear any footsteps that might pass along the passage to the Photographs Library on the other side.

The telephone rang. Blount took up the receiver, listened a moment, said, "O.K."

"That's my man," he said to Nigel. "Billson has left his house in a car."

"Let's hope he's not off to Dublin or somewhere."

"Don't you worry. I've got a mobile patrol out there. They'll be following him now. If he bolts, we've got him. If he comes back here, we'll get him. He's in a cleft stick."

"So Hark'ee told him not long ago. Funny how one always takes things metaphorically nowadays. When Miss Finlay overheard Hark'ee telling him he could go to the dogs for all Hark'ee cared, I never thought of the literal meaning. Hark'ee must have known about Billson's passion for gambling on the dogs."

"Aye, that's how it started, no doubt. Billson got badly into debt, and one of his race-track friends was a bad lot—in touch with enemy agents, and Billson began selling them prints of those secret photographs of yours. I suspect that he must have accidentally destroyed the negative of the one you've been fussing about, while making a print from it; others, too, maybe. He'd never be fool enough to let the Germans have the negatives, when he might be called on to produce them here any time. Well, we'll get it out of him all right."

"If he hasn't taken fright."

"Not he. Our little act this afternoon was bound to put him off his guard."

"And what about our visit to his home this morning?"

"Oh, I talked to him about that earlier today. As I expected, he told the same story as his wife. Said he'd been at the stadium last night, and didn't want it to get round the Ministry. Gave me the names of one or two witnesses. No doubt he did go there earlier in the evening, and slipped out. I pretended to swallow it. Said I'd have to check up on his story, of course. Apologized for the tale I spun his wife about the wallet—aye, the fellow had the audacity to tell me he'd a good mind to have an official inquiry launched into my methods. He's got some nerve, under that pasty face of his."

"Well, I wonder what he's going to do with his nerve tonight. *If* he comes."

"He's going to try and rig those Q files so that M.I.5 don't find anything wrong with 'em."

The telephone rang again. It was the mobile patrol following Billson, to say that he had stopped at the house of one Solly Hawks. Solly, Blount explained to Nigel, was an unamiable character, well known to the police, who had been boss of a race-track gang, served a sentence for gravely injuring a bookie, and was now believed to be mixed up with black market activities.

"What exceedingly low friends our Edgar has got," said Nigel. Then presently, "You know, Blount, there's one thing that's been puzzling me. That Secret file. Secret files are always circulated under cover: in an envelope, that is, with a red tab on them. How on earth could Billson know that the envelope in Jimmy's In tray contained the file he wanted to get rid of?"

"Yes, I thought of that, when I was having a chat this afternoon with your investigation officer. In fact, he told me that no one else had called for the file that day, which is a bit awkward."

"It is indeed," said Nigel. "The only way Billson could have known the file was on its way to the director was if he had rung up the Registry to ask for it himself."

"Oh well, it'll all come out in the wash, no doubt," said Blount.

They continued a desultory, whispered conversation in the dark. Nigel felt his nerves strung tighter. Any moment now. Would their trap be sprung, though? If Billson did enter it, he wouldn't escape as he had escaped the previous night, anyway: the exits from the Ministry were well covered, this time—Blount had seen to that.

Suddenly, without warning, like the blink of an eye, the passage lights went out. Someone had come up the stairs, in uncanny silence. Blount was at the barely opened door. Nigel could just hear the faintest pad of footsteps outside. They passed the door. And then the first unexpected thing of that very surprising night happened. A door further down the passage opened, and they heard the intruder moving about, not in the Photographs Library, but in the deputy director's room. There followed a sound like that of a drawer being opened.

"Did you see who?" whispered Nigel in Blount's ear.

"No."

A minute later, they heard the footsteps moving back through the anteroom into the passage again, the sound of a key turning, another door opening. Yes, he had gone into the Photographs Library now, by the door opposite the anteroom. Acting on their preconceived plan, Blount and Nigel stole out. There was a second door to the Photographs Library, at the other end of the passage; Blount had a key to it, and had taken the precaution of oiling the lock earlier that night. Nigel crept towards the door by which the intruder had entered the library and put his ear to it. He heard, as he had expected, an inner door closing. The intruder had entered the library annex where the Q photographs were stored. Nigel moved back along the passage very slowly, step by step, felt for Blount, gripped his elbow. Very, very slowly, Blount inserted his key in the door, turned it, and silently, inch by inch, pushed the door open.

They were in their stocking feet. They crept into the Photographs Library, feeling their way along the nearest filing cabinet in the pitch darkness. These steel cabinets, their sliding trays each containing sets of photographs in foolscap envelopes, were arranged transversally across the long room, with aisles between them. Peering round the end of their cabinet, Blount and Nigel were looking down the central aisle, the door of Q annex directly opposite them, at the far end. They could see a sliver of light now underneath this door.

They paused there. And then the second unexpected thing happened: which was, that nothing happened at all. The partition wall between the annex and the library proper was so thin that any movement in the annex could not fail to have been heard by them. Yet the anticipated sounds, of metal drawers sliding open, of feet shuffling around the annex, simply did not occur. The intruder appeared to be sitting in there, doing nothing at all; or maybe he was reading an improving book, or going into a trance, thought Nigel irritably.

Blount touched his arm. They began to creep towards the annex, one on each side of the aisle, feeling their way cautiously across the gaps between the ends of the ranks of steel cabinets, in case any chairs had been left lying about in their way. After what seemed to Nigel a large segment of eternity, they had got halfway down the long room. It was like some game of musical chairs in slow motion: at any moment the annex door might open, a light flash into the library; and they must be hidden behind one of the ranks of filing cabinets when that happened.

But still nothing happened. The person in the annex might have been dead, for all the sounds of activity that could be heard. The pair began to creep forward again, only to dodge back behind the cabinets the next moment, for the whine of the lift came to them through the silent building, and then the noise of the lift doors opening, and then footsteps advancing firmly up the passage at a normal gait—the newcomer must have switched the passage lights on—and entering the anteroom; and a door was banged shut, either Jimmy's door or Hark'ee's.

It was extremely disconcerting—this altogether unfurtive new arrival. It seemed to make nonsense, to make farcical melodrama of their present proceedings, thought Nigel. But now, as if those inappropriate footsteps had lifted a spell, the light in the annex went out, the annex door opened and feet whispered through the darkness, moving towards the library door, which was very quietly opened. Nigel cursed the steel cabinet, which cut off his view; for, in the light from the passage, he could otherwise have seen who it was. After about thirty seconds, the library door was gently closed again, then the annex door, and beneath it the sliver of light reappeared. Billson, Nigel assumed, must have crept out for a moment to assure himself who it was that had just entered the director's anteroom. Cautious bloke, Billson. No, he wasn't being so cautious now. At last, from the annex, the long-expected sound was heard of metal trays sliding open, and, with it, a noise halfway between a rustle and a crackle. Negatives, said Nigel to himself, advancing more rapidly now, under cover of that noise, towards the annex door, keeping pace with Blount on the other side of the aisle.

They had reached the last of the rows of cabinets between them and the annex, and Blount was about to cross the intervening space, when a new noise came to them—a sort of plop and hiss, startling and somehow venemous—and the light beneath the annex door suddenly intensified so that it resembled a rod of white-hot steel. The next instant there came a violent whishing and crackling, and at the same moment the annex door flew open and a figure appeared there, outlined against an inferno.

"Edgar Billson! I—"

Blount dodged back behind a steel cabinet just in time. The figure, now at the library door, had whipped out a revolver and fired. The bullet, with the sound of a steel wire breaking under the high tension, twanged diagonally across the room and slammed into a cabinet behind Nigel. The library door banged shut.

"Get this fire out! I'll follow him," shouted Blount, darting to the door, turning on the switches, then disappearing into the passage. Nigel could hear the blasts of his police whistle, and footsteps pounding down the emergency staircase to his right, where so often the staff had hurried downstairs on the approach of a flying bomb.

He raced for the deputy director's room, cannoned into Harker Fortescue in the doorway.

"What the devil? Who's been shooting?"

"Fire in the annex, Hark'ee! Get those fire buckets at the end of the passage! Got to telephone! With you in a minute!"

Nigel plunged for Harker's telephone.

"A.R.P. control! Jump to it! . . . Lewis? Strangeways here. Fire on the sixth floor. Bad one. Send some messengers up to help with the buckets—there's only two of us. Send for the fire brigade. And get that mobile pump out into the back courtyard—play the hose up—you'll see the blaze all right, don't worry. O.K.! Get going then!"

He ran back into the Photographs Library. Harker Fortescue was in the act of hurling a bucket of water into the heart of the flames; as he did so, the magnesium-white center seemed to burst open and send feelers out in every direction.

"My God!" exclaimed Hark'ee, reeling back from the doorway, "that's an incendiary in there, I'll swear. Water's no good. Get the sand buckets."

They raced to the end of the passage and fetched them. But the heat from the blazing piles of negatives prevented them from emptying the sand over the fire's center, and the flames were now dribbling out everywhere, leaping on to furniture and black-out curtains, fanned by the draft between the door and open window.

"It's no good," panted Nigel, drawing Hark'ee back. "Lewis is sending up some chaps to help with the buckets. Stay here and direct 'em, will you? Stop it spreading into the library, if you can. That's the best we can do, till the fire brigade comes."

Nigel knew he could safely leave it to Hark'ee, who had been a part-time A.R.P. instructor during the early blitzes. He tore down the passage, reached the lift just as Lewis' reinforcements were coming out of it at a sedate jog-trot—the fastest gait at which he had ever seen a Ministry messenger proceed—and took the lift down to the ground floor.

In the lobby by the reception desk, a small mob of Ministry staff was collecting, talking excitedly, and getting in the way of the firepump team Lewis had gathered, who were trying to ram their way out into the back courtyard where the mobile pump was housed. A policeman recognized Nigel and forced his way to him through the crowd, shouting, "Stand aside, please! Stand aside! Break it up!"

"Have you seen the superintendent?"

"No, sir. Heard his whistle, though. All our men are on the alert. We've got the exits covered, and the patrol car is shining its headlights along the front of the building."

"Good-oh. Don't let anyone out."

Nigel leaped on to the reception desk, bawling for silence.

"Any ex-firewatchers here? Ministry ones?"

Six or seven men stepped forward.

"Follow me."

Nigel led them swiftly downstairs to the basement floor, along the catacomblike passages, till they reached the foot of the emergency staircase. They were now at the back of the building.

"Two of you stop here. Nab anyone who tries to go up or come down. If it's Mr. Billson—know him? Right—watch out. He's armed. Come along, the rest!"

Blount's whistle was blowing again. Nigel ran towards the sound. He found Blount, panting, disheveled, but intact, at the entrance of the basement sleeping quarters, fifty yards away.

"I've got him cornered in here. He ran this way. We'll beat him out now."

These sleeping quarters, where many of the Ministry staff had slept during the blitzes, were a series of rooms, divided up by blast-baffle walls so that they formed a kind of underground maze. The walls were still lined with two-tier wooden bunks, and a few of these were still occupied by old habitués who had not grasped that the German war was over—or else their own houses were in ruins and they had nowhere else to sleep. Here and there a face looked out from under the blankets, muttering bilious curses against the disturbers of the night's rest, as Nigel's party, reinforced now by a couple of policemen who had come in response to Blount's whistle, proceeded methodically to comb the labyrinth. Two men had been left at the entrance to stop Billson's retreat if he tried to double back.

It was easy to see how Blount could have lost his man here. The blast walls made these underground rooms as intricate as the ridges of a key. One man could dodge another here till kingdom come. But he couldn't dodge a whole search party, sweeping cautiously yet inexorably forwards, examining every bunk, scrutinizing each occupant to make sure that their quarry was not foxing under the blankets, switching on the lights in each successive compartment so that in the glare of the unshaded bulbs the whitewashed walls more than ever resembled the walls of some labyrinthine catacomb.

It was only a matter of time now. And a question whether, coming round one of the blast walls, you might not be picked off by a bullet. Billson's revolver presumably had at least five left, thought Nigel queasily. But the party reached the last compartment, after Blount had peered very cautiously indeed round the end of the blast wall. And the compartment was empty.

"Damn it, it's impossible. He must be here. This is a dead end."

"No, sir," said one of the firewatchers. "Emergency exit in the wall. Behind that bunk."

Blount plunged for it. The bunk was dragged aside, revealing a metal plate, rather like an oven door, in the whitewashed wall. Blount depressed its handle, pulled, then pushed; the door swung outwards into darkness.

"What's outside?"

"Back courtyard," replied the firewatcher.

Blount struggled through the hole in the wall. Nigel came behind him, and in a moment was gazing at a remarkable scene. In the center of the courtyard stood the Ministry's mobile firepump. Lewis, at the nozzle, was directing a jet of water at a sixth-floor window; it was as though the flames were trying to climb out of the window, and the steely arm of water to push them back. At the same time a clanking could be heard from the street at the far end of the courtyard, and a policeman unlocked the gate in the ten-foot-high iron railing which separated the courtyard from the street. The gate swung open to admit the approaching fire engines. And, as it did so, Nigel realized that this was what Billson must have been banking on if he had come out through the emergency exit. The air was full of shouting and clanging, the drumming of the mobile pump's engine, the hissing of the hose. The eyes of Lewis' men and of the approaching firemen were fixed on the blaze overhead. Then, in the sudden glare of the fire engines' headlights as they turned in from the street, Nigel saw a figure slinking along by the railings towards the open gate. Blount saw it in the same instant, yelled, and ran towards the gate to shut it. But it was nearly a hundred yards away, and Billson was only twenty yards from it, and Blount had not yet, in all this clamor, attracted the attention of the policeman at the gate.

Nigel snatched the nozzle of the hose from Lewis, leaned all his weight on it as the pressure of the water tried to buck him off the hose, and swung the jet down and round in a streaming arc. Billson was now ten yards from the open gate, silhouetted against the fire-engines' headlights. The jet seemed to feel for him, to waver, then to leap at him. Billson was dashed against the railings by the jet's pressure, and pinned there, spread-eagled and impaled on a quivering spear of water.

Ten minutes later, they were sitting in a conference room on the ground floor of the Ministry. Edgar Billson's pallid face emerged from a chrysalis of blankets; the fight had been knocked out of him by the hosing which had saturated his clothes; his eyes, watery enough at normal times, seemed to be swimming now with exhaustion and self-pity. Nigel had asked Blount that the deputy director should be present at the questioning of Billson, ostensibly on the grounds that a senior Ministry officer should hold a watching brief in the matter of the Q photograph files.

Blount had charged his prisoner with arson, and given him the official caution. Edgar Billson—the old Billson so familiar as a champion obstructionist, an arguer of every toss, a professional splitter of the hairs of procedure—was hardly recognizable in this shivering creature before them. He did not even claim his right to legal advice. He was evidently determined to make a full confession. And he announced this determination with a vicious look at Harker Fortescue which confirmed the theory that had taken shape in Nigel's mind.

Rather more than a year ago, said Billson, he had sustained a series of gambling losses and fallen heavily into debt. Not long afterwards he had been approached by a certain person, with the suggestion that he should "lend" this person from time to time the negatives of any particularly interesting photographs in the Q files. Small sums were to be paid in cash, for the loan of each negative, and the negatives were to be returned on the following day.

"The name and address of this person?" asked Blount.

"I shall come to that later," replied Billson in a voice which almost seemed to gloat. At first, he continued, he had not suspected anything wrong, for the negatives requested had been of the type censored on policy grounds, not on security.

"You mean, an official photographer snapped some Allied leader with his pants down? That sort of thing?" asked Nigel.

"Precisely. But after a bit this person to whom I have alluded came back with a request for another class of photograph. Photographs showing detail of secret apparatus—radar devices on aircraft, for example. I protested vigorously. I pointed out that, if such photographs got into the hands of enemy agents, they might reveal vital information. You will appreciate, gentlemen, when I tell you who this person was, why it had not yet dawned upon me that he was an enemy agent himself."

"Oh, do let's stop all this circumlocution," said Nigel impatiently. "It's quite obvious that the 'certain person' is our esteemed deputy director."

The sergeant taking down Billson's evidence snapped the point of his pencil and swore under his breath. Blount bounced in his chair, as if a small charge had exploded beneath it. Billson showed his teeth in a ratlike grimace and nodded. Harker Fortescue, his face still grimy from the fire fighting, gazed coldly at Billson, saying, "Don't be a prize ass. Look here, Superintendent, I'd better explain—"

"We'll come to you later," said Blount grimly. "And I must warn you now that anything you say may be taken down and used in evidence. Now, Billson, will you be prepared to swear on oath that Harker Fortescue was the person to whom you supplied negatives of the Q photographs?"

"Yes. With pleasure."

"Never mind about the pleasure. Get on with your story."

When Fortescue had asked for a second selection of security-censored negatives, Billson continued, he began to entertain the gravest suspicions of him. But he himself was now in the toils. Having already supplied one set, he had laid himself open to the charge of complicity in a very serious offense. Besides, he was still badly in debt, and his creditors were putting on pressure—and, in short, he succumbed to the temptation. Imagine his consternation when Fortescue told him, the next day, that four of these negatives had been ruined; a V-2 had fallen in the vicinity of Fortescue's house, and the concussion had spilt a bottle of acid over them in his dark room. Fortescue, he asserted, had made no further requests for negatives thereafter; Billson imagined he had been frightened off. Transactions between them had then ceased and no mention of the secret photographs was made.

"Until you started trying to blackmail me about them," interrupted the deputy director.

"I object to that term," said Billson.

"Now, at last, we know what you and he were quarreling about in his room, at lunchtime, three weeks ago," said Nigel.

"My financial position had become—h'rrm—somewhat embarrassing again. I decided to ask the deputy director for a loan."

" 'Ask for a loan' is good," drawled Fortescue. "You threatened me with exposure, and I pointed out that if I went to the Tower, you'd certainly go with me. You were in a cleft stick, my poor Billson, and you knew it. Even if it hadn't got as far as a trial for high treason—and it wouldn't have—your conduct would certainly have had you shot out of the civil service. I was *not* a permanent civil servant, so why should I worry?"

"You———!" Billson came out with a string of abuse more fitted to the race track than the conference room. "You dragged me into this! Why didn't you take the negatives yourself? It'd have been simple enough. You have a key to the Q annex."

Nigel leaned forward eagerly. Much depended upon the answer to this hysterical question.

"There are a number of possible reasons," Harker Fortescue drawled, his fishy eyes dispassionately fixed upon Billson. "Perhaps I was afraid you might catch me borrowing the negatives. Perhaps I wished to test the integrity of one of my subordinate officers. Perhaps I was just pulling your leg."

Billson swore at him again, foully. Blount, who had astutely decided to let the pair fight it out, now interposed.

"This is all vairy instructive. But I think you had better get on with your evidence, Billson. When did you first plan to get rid of Mr. Lake? Was Fortescue your accomplice in that, too?"

From the back of the building they could hear the occasional shout of a fireman, and the rattle of the appliances. The fire had been under control when they entered the conference room, and it should not be long now before it was extinguished.

The crisis had come, said Billson, when Strangeways put in an order for several prints, among which was a secret photograph whose negative was one of the four destroyed in Fortescue's dark room. Billson had stalled as long as he could. But, when the director sent a peremptory order that the prints in question must be supplied within twenty-four hours, he was in a most dangerous predicament. He could probably explain away the disappearance of one negative—it might have been mislaid or lost. But the search for it would inevitably reveal that three others were missing. M.I.5 would certainly be brought in, and Billson admitted he was in a panic lest the investigation should then disclose the treasonable purposes to which these negatives had been put.

His first thought had been to destroy the PHQ file without which a check of these particular photographs would be at least seriously hampered. But he found that this file had already disappeared.

"What's that?" exclaimed Blount. "You did *not* take the file yourself?"

Billson strenuously denied it, and Blount failed to shake him on this point. Nigel felt sure Billson must be telling the truth; having confessed so much, it was inconceivable he could be lying about the file. And it was *after* the murder of Nita Prince that the director's hue and cry about the missing file had started. Nigel had not time to pursue this thought further, for Billson was now accusing Fortescue of having made away with the file.

"Of course he must have. He stood to lose as much as I did, if the whole business came out."

On the afternoon of Miss Prince's death, Billson continued, he began to fear that the director was hot on the track of the missing negatives. Jimmy Lake was kicking up a great fuss about the file, throughout the division; and that he should do so only a few hours after his secretary had been murdered, at a time when so terrible an event might have been expected to drive everything else out of his mind, seemed to argue that his gravest suspicions had been aroused in the matter of the Q photographs. But the director, as far as Billson knew, was the only person in the division who could have any inkling of the real truth. His confidential secretary was dead; the deputy director—the only man whom he would consult at this stage—was not likely to give anything away. If the director were silenced, investigation into the Q prints would go no further;

would go no further, at any rate, provided that his death could be thrown upon someone else.

Billson accordingly laid his plans to implicate Merrion Squires. His discovery of Squires some time back, in the act of slashing Miss Prince's coat, put the idea into his head. He typed the note to Merrion, signing it with Nigel's initials, to insure that he should be on the Ministry premises that night; took Merrion's knife and white coat. The director had already told him he was going to work late, and it was generally known in the division that, when the deputy director worked late, he took a break in the canteen about eleven o'clock. Billson said he had first intended to wear the coat when attacking the director. But then he feared that, even in the pitch-dark room, it might show up. So he left it outside the door. When he realized that the knife had not done the job instantly, having heard Jimmy Lake stir and seen a strip of light appear beneath the door, he did not dare enter again. Listening at the door, he heard Jimmy telephone. He then picked up the coat, raced for the lift, pressed all the buttons to delay those who were coming up, ran downstairs into the lavatory a floor below, made a cut in his leg and let some blood fall on to the sleeve of the coat, which he then hid where he hoped it would soon be found. He knew that his own blood was of the same group as the director's, both having volunteered for the Ministry's blood-transfusion scheme. He had finally walked down to the ground floor, entered one of the rooms on the front of the building, and jumped into the street through a window. As he walked away, he had seen the messengers pouring out to form a cordon; it had been a narrow escape for him.

During this stage of Billson's confession, there were points where Blount had to press him pretty hard. But on the whole it flowed freely. And Nigel imagined this was so because, Jimmy Lake now being out of danger, Billson had no murder charge to fear, while in the matter of the photographs he had aimed to turn king's evidence, and thus receive a more lenient sentence. Presumably he had a fair chance of this, for without his evidence a treason charge against Fortescue could not possibly stand. But, if Billson confessed to the attack on Jimmy simply because it had been unsuccessful, he must logically be innocent of the murder of Miss Prince, if the poison she drank had been intended for Jimmy. The last thing Billson would do, had it been he who poisoned the coffee, would be to confess so readily to a second attack on the director.

Blount was now taking Billson through the events of today. The director's instructions that the Q files were to be checked did not come as a surprise to him. It was inevitable, since Jimmy was still alive. But the pretended arrest of Merrion Squires for the attack on Jimmy, and the withdrawal of the police from the building, had persuaded him that he was under no immediate suspicion in the matter of the Q photographs. Moreover, the deputy director had said that the PHQ file had been found again, and a check of the photographs would be easy. He decided that the Q files must be destroyed—he did not think he could rig them to stand investigation by M.I.5 An accidental fire? The idea of fire put a whole scheme into his head. He knew that Harker Fortescue had a practice incendiary bomb in his cupboard—a souvenir of his A.R.P. instruction days. He was burning to get back at Fortescue; determined that, if he himself had to be ruined, he would drag Fortescue down with him.

He called at the house of Solly Hawks, to arrange that an alibi should be set up for the night's work, and to borrow a revolver in case Fortescue should try to interfere. He had previously made sure that Fortescue would be sleeping, as in fact he usually did, at the Ministry. He had gone into Fortescue's room, taken the incendiary bomb, and also taken a small fountain-pen-size flash from one of Fortescue's desk drawers, intending to drop it in the Photographs Library as a faked clue against the director. Then he had gone into the annex and waited. This accounted for the period of inactivity which had surprised Nigel. It was essential to Billson's plan that the fire should not break out before Fortescue arrived in his room; otherwise he might have an alibi for it. Billson had waited till he heard footsteps in the passage, crept into the anteroom to make sure Fortescue was in position, then returned and set off the bomb in a heap of the Q negatives. At one stroke he hoped thus to destroy the evidence of treason against himself, and to throw the guilt of the arson on the deputy director. If an investigation into the Q photographs could get anywhere, with the evidence destroyed, it would be only Fortescue's word against his own. And it would be Fortescue who had incriminated himself by setting fire to the negatives, while Billson would have an alibi for the night supplied by some accommodating friend of Solly Hawks.

"I was only obeying his instructions, after all," Billson concluded. "He had told me to get rid of the evidence."

"What the devil is he talking about now? This gets crazier and crazier," said Fortescue calmly.

"You know well enough," replied Billson, glowering at him. "During the progress meeting, just after you'd announced there was to be an examination of the Q files, you turned to Commissions Pending. You repeated the phrase and then said the police would be withdrawn from the building this afternoon. And you added that those of us who were left could get on with our work in peace. I suppose you'll deny this was your subtle way of conveying to me that I could set to work at once on destroying the Q file evidence."

"I certainly do deny it. Never heard such nonsense in all my life."

"Nevertheless," said Blount, "it seems to me you have a good deal of explaining to do. You are at liberty, of course, to refuse to answer questions before obtaining legal advice."

The deputy director looked steadily at Blount, at Nigel, at the venomous face of Edgar Billson, in turn. When he spoke, it was in the trenchant, almost autocratic manner, with which he was wont to address his subordinates on the more official occasions.

"It would be perfectly open to me to deny the whole thing. It is Billson's word against mine; and one is not likely to give much credit to the word of a self-confessed murderer—or would-be murderer. Apart from this, there is not a shred of evidence against me. Nor would you ever find it. You and M.I.5 could work yourselves black in the face trying to discover any contacts of mine with the enemy, any evidence that I passed on secret information to them. You'd never find it. Because I didn't. However, I do not propose to deny the whole of Billson's statement. What I would like to know—" Hark'ee's eye twinkled for a moment—"is how Strangeways picked on me as the sinister Mr. X whom Billson kept hinting at."

Leaning back in his chair, Nigel appeared to be studying a chart on the opposite wall, which illustrated the public response to the Eat More Potatoes campaign. His eye still fastened upon it, he said,

"It's probably as true as any other generalization that every collector is a potential criminal. No doubt a great number of them are actual criminals. I wouldn't know. Blount, you'd better ask the deputy director to say a few words about his collection of filthy pictures."

If a superintendent of the C.I.D. could ever be said to gibber, Blount gibbered now. Hark'ee stroked his bald head, still grimy from fire fighting; his thin mouth twitched.

"Strangeways is an extremely useful member of my staff," he said; "it is fortunate that he has such a good memory. This isn't the first time I have profited by it." He then proceeded to relate his version of Billson's story.

After explaining to the superintendent the nature of his collection of "feelthy peectures"—that gallery of the great in unguarded moments and ill-considered postures, which he had described to Nigel one night in the canteen—he went on to tell how it had occurred to him to adorn this gallery with selections from the policy-censored Q photographs. He had been far too busy himself to examine them for suitable material; so he had thought, why not put Billson onto it? At the outset, it was a pure fantasy thought. But the idea of the correct and rigid Billson searching his files for photographs of the great in, so to speak, undress—this idea so tickled Hark'ee that he did approach Billson, "just to see what he'd say, really." To his surprise, Billson consented, demanding to be paid a certain sum for each print; he, Billson, would make the prints himself, as he did not care to let the negatives out of his possession. Harker had not told Billson why he wanted the photographs. After a bit of haggling, the bargain was sealed.

Hark'ee, thinking it over, found his suspicions aroused by Billson's ready consent, no less than by his demand for money. He made a few tactful inquiries, and learned that Billson was an habitué of the race tracks. Now, strictly speaking, what his officers did in their spare time was no business of the deputy director's, provided there was nothing illegal about it. But it occurred to him that an officer of the Ministry, whose conduct suggested that he might be in debt, and who was responsible for the safekeeping of secret photographs, might conceivably be a source of disquietude. So he decided to test Billson's integrity by asking him to supply a set to security-censored photographs, showing certain secret apparatus. Billson had at first refused, with a great show of righteous indignation. But presently he gave way, stipulating that he would not make the prints himself but only "lend" Hark'ee the negatives, and that a high price must be paid for the loan.

At this point, said Hark'ee, he had suddenly realized that Billson had suspected *him* of being an enemy agent from the start of the transactions. He now agreed to Billson's terms. Two sets of negatives were loaned to him. When some of the second set were accidentally destroyed, he perceived that things had gone too far. What had begun as a joke, and continued as a test of Billson's integrity, might now, if the facts came out, put Hark'ee himself in an awkward position. "The mists of collector's mania cleared away for a moment, and I saw how very odd the whole thing would look to an outside observer," was how he put it to Blount.

He had at once called off the transactions. He had not paid, and had no intention of paying, the high sums demanded by Billson for the two last sets of negatives. And it was this refusal that was the subject of the quarrel between them, overheard by Miss Finlay. On the other hand, knowing that his own share in the transactions would be difficult and embarrassing to explain, and feeling that—unreliable though they had proved Billson to be—it would be a "bit low" to expose Billson now on this account, he had not passed on the facts to the director.

"Ah," Blount interrupted. "That's a crucial point. You divulged the facts to no one else."

"No one. I told Billson—that was the day after Miss Finlay overheard our little dispute—told him the truth, why I'd asked him for the pictures, and made it clear to him that he'd have to watch his step in the future. And the silly ass didn't believe a word of it—"

"Bluff! Who'd believe a cock-and-bull story like that?" exclaimed Billson viciously.

"You see? He still doesn't believe it. He's got it into his thick head that I'm a male Mata Hari, and nothing'll ever get it out now."

"You have no means of proving your story, I take it?" asked Blount.

"None at all. Except that I can show you the prints in my private collection. But no doubt you'll tell me this might only be my shop window, and I'd been passing other copies under the counter to our late-lamented enemy."

The superintendent faced him formidably.

"You are not well advised to treat the matter lightly, Mr. Fortescue. You may be telling us the truth. You may not. You can be sure that if there have been any contacts between yourself and enemy agents, they will be brought to light now. There will be a most stringent investigation into your movements throughout the war, and before it. But, if you are proved innocent in this respect, you must still realize that your actions have been indirectly responsible for an attempted murder, for the destruction by fire of crown property—and, it may be, for the death of Miss Prince."

"I didn't do it!" shouted Billson suddenly. "Not that! I'd nothing to do with that! I swear it!"

Harker Fortescue coldly waited for the outburst to end. Then he said, "I cannot accept responsibility for anything this little rat did after I'd told him the facts, explained why I originally asked him for the photographs. I'm terribly sorry that such things should have happened. But I'm not wasting any sympathy on Billson. A man who could try and frame Merrion Squires, as he's confessed to doing—well, he can take what's coming to him. It makes me sick just to think of it. As for myself —do *you* believe me, Nigel?"

"*I* think it's all in character. Yes," replied Nigel non-committally. "On the other hand, Hark'ee, you'd better realize now how other people will see it. They may argue that your collection of 'feelthy peectures' has from the start been a cover for traitorous activities. It *would* be a good cover, you know. And they will ask themselves what you were doing before the war, when you traveled all over Europe, *including Germany,* to add to your collection. And they may doubt, not knowing your peculiar sense of humor, whether such a hobby could really be enough to explain so much expense of time and money. No, Hark'ee, I'm afraid M.I.5 will put a very large question mark to your story."

Chapter 8

(1) Mr. Strangeways: To See
(2) Mr. Ingle: To Discuss

So, to all intents and purposes, we are back where we started, thought Nigel.

It was the afternoon following the arrest and confession of Edgar Billson, a Saturday afternoon. Most of the Ministry staff had left the building by one o'clock, to make the best they could of the short wartime week end. Just as Nigel was himself about to leave, Brian Ingle had come into his room and, after some blushing and stammering, asked if Nigel could do him a favor. Brian, it turned out, wanted a keepsake of Nita Prince's—a book he had once given her. He had been fond of her; and he possessed nothing by which he could remember her. It seemed a pleasant, if old-fashioned, act of piety. Nigel had accordingly rung up Blount, and asked if there was any objection to his meeting Brian in Nita's flat that afternoon, and letting him have the book. Blount told him it would be in order. He added that the police inquiries at Nita's bank had disclosed only a small balance of £350 odd, that she had as far as they could discover died intestate, and that her next of kin was a married sister living in New Zealand. So money was clearly not a possible motive for her murder.

Nigel had made an appointment for Brian Ingle to meet him at the flat at 3 P.M. He himself, after picking up some sandwiches at a pub nearby, had gone straight to Dickens Street, where the slatternly caretaker let him in. She thought he was a C.I.D. man, having seen him last with Blount, and he had some difficulty in staving off her ghoulish inquiries about "Who'd done in that poor girl?" Alone at last, in the rooms from which Nita's presence, like a ghost at the old trysting place, seemed reluctant to vanish, Nigel ate his sandwiches and fell into uneasy speculation.

To all intents and purposes we're back where we started. It seems pretty clear that the whole *affaire Billson* is a monster red herring trailed across the scene by destiny. In a closely knit community like V.P.D., one must expect such minor secrets to be touched off by a major explosion, by the murder of Nita. "There's going to be an awful lot of muck turned over," Hark'ee said; and how right he was—the photographs business, Merrion's coat-slitting outbreak. What would come out of the bag next? And would it have no more than this accidental connection with the central mystery? On the face of it, of course, Billson might now seem the likeliest person to have poisoned the coffee cup. But there's so much to be said against it. First, the evidence all seems to show that Jimmy did not start to get worked up about the PHQ file till after the poisoning. Surely Billson wouldn't have poisoned Nita's cup, believing it to be Jimmy's, unless he felt *certain* that Jimmy was hot on his track. Now the first sign that Jimmy was getting warm was his sending for the file. But Billson didn't know that the file was missing, hadn't attempted to obtain it for his own purposes, and therefore couldn't have suspected that Jimmy was hot on the track, and therefore couldn't have planned to poison him *till after the poisoning took place.* That isn't perfectly logical, my boy. I know it isn't. Let's take the hypothesis, then, that Billson *did* get in an unwarranted panic, *before* the poisoning, lest Jimmy had discovered his secret, and therefore planned to kill him. You see, my good chap, the whole conception at once collapses on the word "planned." Billson was not invited to the party in Jimmy's room. He'd never have been there at all if Charles Kennington had not, only a minute before coffeetime, taken it into his head to invite him. Nor, until a few minutes before the crime took place, had Billson so much as set eyes on the instrument with which it was committed. How could he *plan* a murder with a poison container he had never seen? And, if the murder of Jimmy was intended, surely Billson wouldn't be such a fool as to get the cups mixed up. All right, my boy, I grant you all that. But suppose Billson wanted to, knew he *had* to get rid of Jimmy double quick; suppose he then found himself in a room with his victim and a poison container. Might he not have acted impromptu? That is possible. Yes. But it's not in character. Look at Billson's subsequent crimes. The second attack on Jimmy, the burning of the Q files in the annex, and the calculated attempts to throw the guilt for them on Merrion and on Harker, the alibis prepared for himself—everything cold, cautious, cut and dried, and the very opposite of the poisoning. Besides, what did he do with the poison container after he'd used it?

Well then, given that the poison was intended for Jimmy, who else had a motive? Hark'ee. But only (a) if he is in fact a traitor and was lying last night, which I don't believe, and (b) if he knew that Jimmy had suspicions about the Secret files. But when I rang up Jimmy this morning, he was absolutely definite that he'd suspected nothing fishy about the Q photographs till the PHQ file disappeared. He'd sent for it, on the morning of Nita's death, simply to glance over the list of canned photographs which might be available for the Pacific job, if the censorship stop could be lifted. He had not imagined for a moment that there was anything more in Billson's recalcitrance over the Q print I'd ordered than his usual official stickiness—not until the disappearance of the file began to put ideas into his head. He had not discussed his suspicions with the deputy director even then. And if, by some extraordinary feat of clairvoyance, Hark'ee was enabled to see into the future state of Jimmy's mind, and therefore attempted to poison him in order to forestall the suspicions which Jimmy did not yet entertain, what did Hark'ee do with the poison container after he had used it?

Merrion Squires, then? His only possible motive for wishing to get rid of Jimmy is that he's deeper involved with Jimmy's wife than he admitted. Blount will ferret that out, if there's anything in it. But it doesn't make sense, in any case, for Alice Lake was free to get a divorce from her husband—he had even sounded her about it. And the same holds good for Mrs. Lake herself having attempted to poison him, in order to be free to marry Merrion.

Charles Kennington? A quixotic gesture? Murdering Jimmy because he had been unfaithful to Charles' sister? Absurd. Because he had stolen Charles' fiancée? Not quite so absurd, but absurd enough.

Brian Ingle? Because he loved Nita: and, with Jimmy out of the way, she might have come to him. No. It's too thin altogether.

The other hypothesis, then—that there was no accident with the cups, and Nita Prince was the intended victim.

Edgar Billson. No apparent motive. Harker Fortescue, ditto; Blount had failed to find any association between Hark'ee and Nita, except that she worked for Hark'ee's agency some time before the war.

Merrion Squires? He didn't like Nita. She had rejected his advances, he told us. But Merrion makes a pass at almost anything in skirts—it's automatic with him. And, if everyone who pushed him off was to get murdered, London would be littered with dead females. No real link between him and Nita has been discovered. Count him out, for the present.

Brian Ingle? In love with Nita. A forlorn hope for him. A good-hearted little chap. Inconceivable, after knowing Nita for several years, and therefore presumably knowing about her affair with Jimmy, that he should suddenly up and poison *her.*

Charles Kennington? On the face of it, he's the best bet. We've only his word for it, that he was prepared to hand over his fiancée to Jimmy without a murmur. He provided the poison. His secret service training and experience make him the most likely person to have been able to get rid of the poison container afterwards. What did that silly old messenger say, the morning before?—"Millions of young men trained to kill, proper artful, too." It was artful enough certainly. At least, it could have been; a carefully staged murder, rigged up to look like an impromptu one. Kennington has the dramatic instinct well developed, that's obvious enough. If only these walls would tell what he really said to Nita that night. She confessed to him about her relationship with Jimmy—that's why she asked him to come along. Did he just give it his blessing, as he told us? Or did he cut up rough? Or did he pretend to accept it quite calmly, and go away with murder in his heart? Nita was still in a state the next morning—the crumpled handkerchief, the distrait air. But there's one gigantic obstacle to all this. Charles Kennington is not, by any sign or symptom, the jealous type. Just look at him. Think about him for a moment. Can you imagine him as an Othello?

And the same applies to his sister. They are both highly civilized creatures. Why should Alice Lake, after accepting her husband's mistress for years, turn round and kill her? If she were a neurotic or a wildly passionate woman, if she was madly in love with Jimmy still—well then, something might have happened just before Nita's death to explode her accumulated resentment. But surely she isn't; think of her, sitting equably at Jimmy's bedside, holding his hand as if she were a nurse feeling his pulse. I ask you! Nevertheless, I must get to know her better before I can be sure. And Charles.

Jimmy Lake himself? His only possible motive, since his wife knew about his relations with Nita and was apparently complacent, is that he wanted to free himself from Nita but could not do so in any other way. Don't underestimate that motive, my boy. Under certain conditions, it could be immensely strong. What conditions? First, that Nita should be an insinuating, clinging, tenacious character: well, we have fair evidence that she was. Second, that Jimmy was tired of her: no proof at all; one or two very shadowy suggestions, which might be interpreted quite differently. Third, that there was no other way of releasing himself from her grip: on the face of it, preposterous; why shouldn't he just walk out? Pay her off? Psychologically, though, not so preposterous; a weak character, a morally unrobust character might be incapable of freeing himself except by such violent means. But is Jimmy a weak character? What is Jimmy really like? The fact is, you don't know. Find out, then. And find out, incidentally, if he's the sort of man who, having poisoned his girl, would publicly slap her on the back and tell her to "cough it up, ducky." It seems impossibly macabre, utterly incredible, that anyone—and besides, *how did he get rid of the poison container?*

To that insoluble question, again and again, the problem reduced itself. And it applied equally to all the suspects except Brian Ingle. Brian *could* have thrown it out into the street when he opened the window. It could then have been carried away on someone's boot sole or the tire of a car. But Brian was the one person who seemed to have no adequate motive for murdering either Nita or Jimmy. Charles Kennington's experiences put him next on the list in this respect. But how could even the capturer of Stultz convey a broken container out of that room? Blount had dealt very severely with Sergeant Messer. But in fact, Nigel now knew, the sergeant had been at fault only in one point of his search. He had examined the suspects' clothes most thoroughly, after they had stripped behind the screen; then searched the possible hiding places on their bodies, although none of them had had an opportunity to secrete the thing in that way. The only point where he could possibly have slipped up was in his examinations of their mouths. He had glanced into their mouths, but not run his finger round their teeth. The poison container might, theoretically, have been concealed from him in a gap between the back teeth—in the very place where, as Charles Kennington had told them earlier that morning, the Nazis kept these containers lodged if danger seemed imminent.

But there were two crushing objections to this possibility. First, who but a lunatic would have tried to hide the container thus, knowing there was going to be a rigorous search by the police, and when he only had to drop it anywhere in the room, after wiping it with his handkerchief in his pocket, for his association with it to be entirely sponged out? And second, supposing someone *had* been lunatic enough to hide the thing in his mouth, he would inevitably have betrayed himself; for the container must have been broken to decant the poison into Nita's cup, and there were bound to be traces enough of the poison left in the container to cause at least a severe fit of choking, from the fumes, when it was put in the mouth. It was the certainty of this, in fact, which had led the too-intelligent Sergeant Messer to his slight carelessness over the examination of the suspects' mouths.

Nigel, now lighting another cigarette, set himself to grapple once again with this problem. It faced him as two blindingly enigmatic questions. *How* was the container hidden from the police and conveyed out of the room? Why was it *necessary* to the murderer to remove it from the room? The first of these questions he had run his head against, hard and often, and it yielded nothing. Maybe if he could find the right answer—no, if he could get as far as imagining a possible answer—to the second question, it would throw some light on the first.

Well then, why does any murderer remove the weapon from the scene of the crime? Because it might be identified, and incriminate him. But in this case we had all seen the weapon; it was positively on display a few minutes before the murder. Therefore it was unnecessary for the murderer to remove it. But the murderer *did* remove it. It's a vicious circle, absolutely unbroken, no way to break out of it. Oh, my sainted ancestors down to the seventy-seventh generation! I've got it! I see how to break out of the circle!

Nigel floundered up from the armchair and began pacing the room excitedly, his mind full of the image which an idle phrase had presented to him. A clear, visual image: absurdly simple, yet revolutionizing his whole conception of the case. What it implied was perfectly logical—the only logical answer to his second question; and, with mounting excitement he realized, it also gave a rational answer to the first. What it did not give, he soon ruefully admitted, was any definite clue to the identity of the murderer. Still, that could wait. He took up the telephone and got through to Superintendent Blount at New Scotland Yard.

"Blount? Strangeways here. A most extraordinary idea has come into my head. . . . Yes, about the poisoning of Nita Prince. I think I know why and how the murderer spirited that poison container away. . . . No, I don't know who it is yet. . . . No, blast you, I haven't got any evidence for it yet—I did it by an exercise of pure reason. . . . Don't be offensive, Blount old boy. Getting the evidence is the job of the plodding policeman, meaning you. May I suggest this for a start—find out which of the suspects had access to poison. . . . Yes, I know they all did, I'm not a half-wit; I mean access to some *other* supply of cyanide. . . . What? . . . Yes, on the whole no harm at all in letting them know that you're looking for it. It'll shake *X* to the core, whoever he is, and he may do something silly. . . . No, not just a bluff; it *is* essential to find out if any of them had another supply. The point is this—" but Nigel had not time to start unfolding his theory, for the doorbell rang, and Brian Ingle was shown in, and Nigel had to ring off.

Brian sat down gingerly in the armchair Nigel had vacated. His eyes flickered about the room, screwed up as if the light, or what he saw, hurt them.

"You've not been here before?" asked Nigel at a venture.

"Oh no. No. I couldn't, could I? Feeling as I did for Nita, I mean."

After a pause, Nigel said, "I wish you'd talk to me about her."

"Yes, I've been meaning to. But you were busy. And—I s-say, Nigel, have the police—I mean, do they suspect anyone particularly yet? Was it Billson? I see Merrion's back at work this morning, so it can't be him."

"Funny. You're almost the first person to ask me about that. The self-control of our colleagues is remarkable."

"It's n-not self-control," burst out the little man. "It's sheer callousness! What do they care? One more death. We've had so much death these last years, our reaction to it is atrophied. We're not interested."

"Including Jimmy?"

Brian Ingle went into one of his tracelike silences. Nigel knew well enough not to break it, or try to hurry him. It was like watching a mouse bring forth a mountain.

"I don't know," said Brian at last. "He used to love her, of course. But —I wish I knew."

" 'But'?" prompted Nigel.

After another protracted silence, Brian came out with, "She was very unhappy, lately."

"Did she confide in you much about it?"

Brian Ingle's eyes roved round the room, more boldly now. "He was good to her. Yes, I must admit that." Long pause. "You know, Nigel, I simply couldn't bear to talk to that superintendent much. Oh, he's a very decent fellow, I'm sure. But it all seemed so irrelevant. She was dead. What did it matter who killed her? And—well,

The sweeping up the heart
And putting love away
We shall not want to use again
Until eternity.

I had an awful lot of sweeping up to do. And all this police investigation —questions, questions, questions—it was like being interrupted by lawyers and telephone calls and letters of condolence when one"—his voice choked a little—"when one is trying to tidy up."

"Yes, I know. But there's this to be said; perhaps the happiest part of her life was over, anyway."

"I could have made her happy," replied Brian, with affecting simplicity. "You see," he smiled crookedly, "I could take any amount of domesticity."

"And Jimmy couldn't?"

Brian Ingle fell into his fit of abstraction again. When he spoke, it seemed, as so often it did with him, at a tangent to the subject.

"She used to come and see me sometimes, in my rooms—I always refused to come here—about the only thing I ever did refuse her. She knew she could rely on me to listen, to console her. About her life with Jimmy."

"That was rather cruel of her, wasn't it?"

"Oh yes, I suppose so. One is cruel when one's in love. To everyone else, I mean, if one's as much in love as Nita was with Jimmy. The single-minded person is bound to ride roughshod over everyone's feelings. And I tell you, it'd have killed her if Jimmy had left her."

"She'd had lovers enough before him," said Nigel with a deliberate roughness. Brian Ingle did not wince.

"That's why," he said, following some enigmatic thought of his own. "You see, they all left her, sooner or later. None of them offered to marry her."

"Why?"

"Because she was too beautiful. Her beauty misled them, Nigel. They thought they'd got the perfect—well, the perfect courtesan. And presently they found out it was a sort of trap; you walked into the Temple of Aphrodite Pandemos, and you found yourself in a snug domestic interior with knitting lying about and the Hoover humming away. Like this." He gestured round the room with his hand.

"It seems to have suited Jimmy all right, though."

"Nita thought so too, at first. For quite a time. So did he, I expect. He and his wife are sophisticated people. They're what's called 'modern': easy come, easy go. Nita was something quite different. Her passion for domesticity—well, it'd be a sort of new, delightful game for him, at first. And then he'd begin to realize that for her it wasn't a game, it was in dead earnest—"

"And no chance of 'easy go'?"

"Well, can you blame her? I know it's easy to talk about a woman getting her claws into a man, suffocating him—oh dear, that word 'suffocate'—how it does bring back all the novels by lady novelists of a certain type I used to review. But people who talk like that never put the other side of the case to themselves—the woman's side. It was just because Nita *had* a rackety life, just because all those men wanted her as a mistress, not as a wife, that she grew to put so high a value on security. Every woman wants security, of course; it's biological. But Nita was dotty about it. I used to laugh at her. Gently, of course. She'd no sense of humor, though, poor darling. Why should she anyway, on that subject? Oh yes, she looked so poised and invulnerable and successful, didn't she? And beneath it there was panic and chaos. She'd no more belief in herself. Thought there must be something terribly wrong with her, because no one would marry her and give her security."

"But Jimmy did? Give her security, I mean?"

"He gave her all the accessories of it, yes," replied Brian with another long look around the room. "And therefore the sense of it, for a while—you know how women have to deceive themselves into taking the shadow for the reality, when the reality isn't there—making emotional bricks without straw. And because he'd given her so strongly the *sense* of security—" Brian broke off suddenly.

"—her disillusionment when she discovered he'd only been playing at homemaking was all the more painful?" suggested Nigel.

Brian Ingle appeared to contemplate this from every angle, like a housewife turning over a prospective purchase on a counter, before he answered.

"I wonder, is that quite right. I wonder. I'd say there *was* a time when Jimmy only played at homemaking. But then a point was reached when his homemaking with Nita became so real that it started to challenge his real home, with his wife, if you see what I mean. A conflict was set up within him. And a very painful one it'd be. He'd know then that he must choose between the two—the equilibrium couldn't be preserved any longer. From that point, he was a divided mind—and Nita began to be unhappy."

Nigel found all this of absorbing interest. Brian's comments were so much more solid than, for instance, Merrion Squires' dashing but superficial strictures on the two persons in question.

"So you think Jimmy was trying to break free?"

"Unconsciously, yes. Mind you, Nita must have had a great physical hold over him, too. I'd say he was a morally weak man, infirm of purpose; the Micawber streak too—waiting for something to turn up which would cut the knot he hadn't the resolution to cut himself."

"In this case, the end of the war?"

"No doubt. It would force him to act one way or the other. I daresay he didn't know which knot it would cut for him, either."

"The Nita knot or the Alice knot?"

"Exactly."

"And Nita was aware of this conflict in his mind?"

"She knew he was on edge. And she tried her best to pull him over the edge onto her side."

"Hence the request for a divorce?"

"That. And other things. She was fighting for her life, poor girl, after all."

"Other things?"

"I don't know—I've never experienced—but I can imagine how a woman might create a blazing inferno for a man she was determined to keep, every word fanning a flame, every look and gesture and silence a reproach or an appeal, every trick in the bag used. I bet she had plenty, too."

"But, if she was in effect making things so hot for him, why shouldn't he just walk out?"

"Oh, my dear Nigel, life isn't as simple as that. She was in his blood. He loved her. Oh yes, he really loved her. He wouldn't get rid of her just by walking out—he was far too intelligent a man to suppose that."

"He wouldn't be rid of her, of his problems, his conflict, till she was dead?" asked Nigel purposefully.

Brian Ingle shrank back in the chair, holding up his hands as if to ward off the question.

"No," he exclaimed. "No, no! Please. This is dreadful. It sounds as if I'd been meaning to accuse him of—Honestly, I didn't."

"But the thought has occurred to you, perhaps?"

The longest of all Brian's silences ensued. He might have been in an epileptic trance, dumb and insentient. At last he spoke, almost to himself:

"Nita *was* frightened."

Another pause.

"Frightened? Recently?"

"The morning she died—was murdered."

"How was that?" asked Nigel, gently, delicately, as if humoring a child.

"I didn't tell the superintendent," said Brian slowly. "When he interviewed me, I wasn't in the mood. I didn't care two pins *who* had killed her, it didn't seem to matter. That was wrong of me, no doubt. Anyway, the morning she died, she came into my room at the Ministry, early. I could see she was very upset—almost incoherent, trying to tell me something. 'Oh Brian, what am I to do? What am I to do?' she kept saying. Wildly. You know, when that sort of woman gets in a panic, she's like an animal. It's terrifying. The mental anguish communicates itself to her body; you see her body, her face—it's like an animal in a trap—you see it actually struggling, jerking, twitching one moment and the next absolutely inert, frozen, in a sort of coma, like the animal shamming dead."

Brian Ingle broke off abruptly, as if silenced by the pain of the recollection.

"What did she say?" asked Nigel.

"I've been trying to remember. It's awfully difficult. You see, she really was—well, like a person in a delirium. Her words hardly made sense. She kept repeating, 'It's my last chance. He said it was my last chance.' 'Last chance to do what?' I asked. 'To give him up.' 'Give Jimmy up, you mean?' She nodded. 'But I won't,' she said; 'I won't, I won't, I won't.' And then she burst into a terrible fit of sobbing. I tried to soothe her. She did quiet down a bit. And I asked her—I don't know why—*when* he'd said this. 'Last night. He came to my flat. Brian, I'm so frightened. I don't know what to do.' I couldn't talk to her any more, because Jimmy came in—I suppose he'd heard her voice from outside—and he said he wanted her straightway to type some letters for him."

"Do you remember anything else she said? Anything. Doesn't matter how wild it was."

"No. . . . Wait a minute. . . . Yes, there was one very curious thing she said—really delirious it seemed. She muttered, 'It startled me so when I saw him. I knew he'd be like that. But it was horrible, Brian. You wouldn't understand, though.' And then, after a bit, she went on. 'I wish I could trust him. There's no one I can trust now.' So of course I said she could always trust me and tried to comfort her. And of course she said, 'I know, Brian, but you're different.' Oh yes, I always different. Just the faithful little dog to take out for a walk when there was no one else—"

Brian broke off, clearly ashamed of this little touch of bitterness.

"And this 'he' she kept talking about. The 'he' who was giving her a last chance, whom she wished she could trust. Whom do you suppose she meant?"

"Well, that's obvious, surely." Brian's eyes opened wide in astonishment "Who would she be talking about but Jimmy?"

"But why should Jimmy 'startle' her so when she saw him?"

"Well, I dunno. I suppose she wasn't expecting him, or something. Who else would come to her flat at night—who else, I mean, with that power to upset her?"

"Who indeed?" replied Nigel, gazing down at his feet and the mellow Persian rug on which they rested. The "he" whom poor, frantic Nita had spoken of—it *could* be Jimmy, it *need* not be Jimmy; she might, for that matter, have been talking about two separate he's. It all depended.

But further questioning extracted no more meat from this egg. Brian Ingle was beginning to look about him, in an absent, impatient way.

"You'd like to take your book now?"

Jumping up from his chair, Brian went over to the bookshelves and ran his eye along them.

"Ah, here it is." He gazed for a moment at the inscription on the flyleaf, then put the book in his pocket.

"Hello," he said, "I didn't know anyone read Clough nowadays." He took up the poems of Clough, still lying on the table beside Nigel's chair, and opened it at the marker. "Well now, that's an interesting passage," he said presently. "He'd have made a good novelist, wouldn't he? 'Like losings in games played for nothing.' Funny we should have been using that word just now."

"What word?"

" 'Games.' The idea, anyway. 'Playing at homemaking.' "

"Oh yes. Yes, to be sure."

"I say, Nigel, you'd think Clough had known Jimmy personally, wouldn't you? Extraordinary. A life-size, lifelike portrait of him, this is. Or of Nita's idea of him, anyway."

"But it must have been another likeness in the passage that caught her attention. How does it go? 'Lo, with her calm eyes there she met me and knew nothing of it,—Stood unexpecting, unconscious. *She* spoke not of obligations.' That's Alice Lake, I take it."

"Mmm. Yes. I suppose it is. But what makes you think that was the bit Nita was interested in?"

"Look at the margin. She wrote a capital *A* there. *A* for Alice."

"Sounds like a bomber. Yes, so she did. It's so faint, I didn't notice it at first. No, she didn't, though. This isn't her writing. She always made a sort of printed *A*. This is an *A* with a squiggle. Look."

Nigel jumped up and almost snatched the book from him.

"Yes, by Jove, you're quite right. Can't think how I missed it. I've seen her initial *A* often enough. She used her full name, Anita, when she signed minutes, didn't she. Well, I must say that's very odd. And the only other person who'd have been likely to mark the book is Jimmy himself."

"And his capital *A* is quite different from this one."

"Yes. Oh well, it probably doesn't mean anything at all. I must be getting along now. Nothing else you'd like to take away?"

Brian Ingle said no. His eyes lingered sadly over the room for a minute. Then he turned away and left. As soon as the door closed behind him, Nigel went back to the bookcase and began looking through the flyleaves of the books. At last he found what he wanted—a book with an inscription to Jimmy from Nita. He brought it to the window and compared it closely with the letter in the margin of the Clough.

It had suddenly occurred to him that, if you took a capital *J,* and added to it *A,* you would produce an 𝒜 precisely the same as appeared in the margin. Provided it was the right kind of *J.* And now, on the flyleaf of the book he had found, was "Jimmy, with all my love, Nita." And the *J* of Jimmy seemed identical in shape with the left-hand *J* stroke of the letter 𝒜 in the margin. The natural deduction was that Nita had originally written a *J* there, because the passage had reminded her of Jimmy, and it was presumably she who had penciled the question mark beside it, too. Then someone had come along and turned the *J* into an 𝒜. Who? And why? Nigel could not, as yet, be sure. And anyhow, it might well just be an idle, meaningless bit of doodling. But possibly the scientific boys at New Scotland Yard would be able to detect whether the 𝒜 was in fact a composite letter, made by two different hands. It would help to be quite sure of that. Nigel left the flat, carrying the two books under his arm, and walked in the direction of New Scotland Yard. . . .

A few hours later, as he was dining at the club, a servant called him out to the telephone. It was Blount at the other end.

"That book you left for me. Our people tell me they think the 𝒜 is composite. The *J* part is slightly less indented than the rest, anyway. And there's a slight thickening on the downstroke of it, which you'd expect from the normal way of writing a *J*—starting at the top, I mean, and ending with the curl. To write a capital 𝒜 of that kind, you'd normally start at the curl and go upward, and then do the right-hand side of the letter with a downstroke, and—"

"All right. I'm ahead of you. What about the second source of poison? Have you had time to get on to tnat?"

"Yes. At least four of the suspects had access to some form of cyanide."

"Gor lumme! Now I've done it! That's too much, Blount."

"Billson used it for photographic purposes. Mr. Lake and Mr. Fortescue possess, or rather say they once possessed, capsules of the poison. Mrs. Lake had access to Mr. Lake's capsule. Billson had signed for his supply in the ordinary way; we're checking the amount he received from the chemist with the amount he has left. Mr. Lake and Mr. Fortescue say they bought theirs in the autumn of 1940, when the invasion scare was on; they both believed they were on the Nazi black list, so they wished to be prepared."

"But they say they haven't got their capsules now?"

"Mr. Fortescue claims that on V-E Day, he—e'eh, pulled the plug on his; had a solemn little ceremony all by himself. Mr. Lake—I went to see him—had his capsule carefully locked away. At least, he thought he had; but, when I opened the drawer with the key he gave me, it wasn't there. Mrs. Lake protested that she knew nothing about the existence of this capsule, and couldn't account for its disappearance. So there you are. And now you'd better tell me what's on your mind."

"Just a minute. All of them volunteered this information quite freely?"

"Yes. Ye-es. Mrs. Lake was a bit rattled, I thought; she was with her husband when I asked him. But there was no attempt at prevarication or concealment."

"Did Lake and Fortescue know about each other's acquisition of cyanide capsules?"

"Yes."

"Has Fortescue no other source? Doesn't he use potassium cyanide, too, for photographic purposes?"

"He says no. We shall check this, of course."

"You realize, Blount, that his admission about the capsule is a point in his favor as far as the Q photographs are concerned? He would hardly need to furnish himself with poison if he was an agent of the Nazis."

"Not to take in the event of the Germans occupying Great Britain, I agree. But he'd need it if the British counterespionage caught up with him."

"In that case, why should he destroy the capsule on V-E Day? He might well have still needed it."

"We've only his word that he destroyed it."

"Certainly. But it'd be to his interest to produce it now, if he still had it. However, my only point at the moment is that Hark'ee's possession and alleged destruction of the capsule works in his favor over the Q photographs but against him over Nita Prince's death."

The telephone yammered a bit.

"But, my dear sir, are you suggesting that Major Kennington's poison container was *not* the means of her death? This is absolutely—"

"Oh, talking of Kennington, surely he had some quick means of suicide, for his espionage work in Germany?"

"Yes," said Blount gloomily. "You could float a duck on the amount of cyanide that's pouring in just now. He volunteers that he did possess a capsule, but says he handed it in at his headquarters when he left Germany. I'm checking this, of course. The War Office have sent out an inquiry for me."

"I take it that these three capsules—Lake's, Fortescue's and Kennington's—would all be of the soluble type?"

"That is so."

"And what about Squires and Ingle? Didn't they have a few pints of poison salted away somewhere?"

"According to their own statements, none," replied Blount with gravity.

"Too bad. No doubt you'll be circularizing the chemists. Don't leave anyone out. Well, Blount, I wish you'd do something for me."

"What's this, now?" asked Blount suspiciously.

"Try and find some more poison."

The telephone yammered in a quite demented way, and Nigel held the receiver away from his ear for a few moments. When Blount had unburdened his bosom, Nigel said, "I think it would be a good plan to get a search warrant and start searching our suspects' belongings for a poison container—a poison container so like the one Kennington took off Stultz as to be indistinguishable from it."

There was an awful silence on the line. Nigel could almost feel Blount struggling to master his emotions. At last, in a sternly controlled voice, the superintendent asked, "Where do you suggest I should begin this—wild-goose search?"

"Oh, begin with the Lakes. Or Charles Kennington."

"You know Kennington has moved into the Lakes' house?"

"He has, has he? Well, well, well. I'll invite him here to lunch tomorrow, so you can have a free hand."

"And now—e'eh—in this little formality of a search warrant, perhaps you'd be kind enough to tell me on what grounds I should apply for it," said Blount with heavy sarcasm.

"My dinner's getting cold. Never mind. It's like this, Blount—"

And Nigel explained to the superintendent the idea which had come to him that afternoon in Nita Prince's flat—the answer to the question why it had been necessary for the murderer to spirit Stultz' thing out of the director's room after the murder, and how he had been able to do it.

When Nigel had finished, Blount agreed to ask for a search warrant.

Chapter 9

Reference: Mrs. Lake

Eleven o'clock the next morning, Sunday, found Nigel Strangeways on his way in a bus to the Lakes' house at Regents Park. He had already, the previous night, secured Major Kennington for lunch. But, before he talked to him, there were certain things which he wished to ask Jimmy and Alice Lake. And certain things which, though he could not ask them, he hoped to discover. Nigel believed that he now knew the identity, the motive and the method of Nita Prince's murderer. But he had no proof, nor did he see how proof could be obtained, unless the murderer was flustered into some ill-judged action. Blount's inquiries about a second source of poison might do this; or again, it might not. It depended, really, upon the murderer's nerve. Would this person, who so far had remained so cleverly quiescent, who had made so little attempt to cover up or to trail red herrings, and therefore had avoided the more flagrant kind of self-betrayal, would this person be goaded into action by Blount's last inquiry, which must convey the hint that the police now had come perilously near to discovering the murder method?

Jolting up empty Baker Street on the top of his bus, Nigel was thinking desperately hard. From now on, every word of his must be directed to one end, to prizing the murderer, like an otter from his holt, out of the security of silence, inaction, acquiescence, out into the open. He knew that he was dealing with a mind of great intelligence and subtlety. Indeed, it was one of the difficulties which had faced the police all through their investigation—that, as far as the death of Nita Prince went, there had been a general lying low, a relative absence of the gossip, the exhibitionism, the hysteria, the bogus confessions, the charges and counter-charges, on which they would normally rely for information. And this was because the suspects were all, with the possible exception of Edgar Billson, persons of high intelligence; moreover, they had been working together for some years now in a small, successful group, whose *esprit de corps,* though they would not all admit it, had affected each of them as individuals, creating a certain resistance to any influence from outside which tended to criticize or threaten the group as a whole.

How far was it true to say that the director himself had been responsible for this *esprit de corps?* Without question, his was the creative mind of the division. His flair for the kind of visual propaganda with which they were concerned was extraordinary; he had created, one might almost say, a new mode of propaganda, and the productions of the division were all stamped with his personality. His charm and tact, besides, had proved indispensable, not only in keeping the wheels of the organization well oiled, in smoothing over the differences which sometimes arose between the temperamental members of his staff, but in selling his own conception of propaganda to other government departments. It was not difficult to understand his success, before the war, as chairman of the National Committee for Public Relations in Industry—that cumbrously named body which had been set up in the middle thirties to boost British products abroad. But, in so far as *esprit de corps* meant fighting spirit, Nigel inclined to think that the division owed it more to Harker Fortescue than to Jimmy Lake. It was Hark'ee's driving power which had got them through the blitzes and the long hours of work, Hark'ee's painstaking examination of every detail of every job which had kept them all up to the mark, Hark'ee's firmness and pugnacity that had fought Jimmy's creative ideas through the resistance so often in the earlier days manifested by government departments, each of which possessed its own public relations staff suspicious or jealous of the growing prestige of the Ministry of Morale.

Such were Nigel's thoughts as, alighting from the bus, he walked through the July sunshine round the curve of the noble crescent at the far end of which stood the Lakes' house. The stucco was discolored and peeling, the magnificent row of houses was gapped in two places, where bombs had fallen; but its grandeur had not departed from the place.

Nigel rang the bell of No. 35. Alice Lake herself answered it. She did not look particularly surprised at his visit, though she could not have been expecting it.

"Oh hello," she said in her cool way. "Do you want to see Jimmy? He's up. He got up yesterday, though I don't suppose it's very good for him, so soon after—" Her voice trailed away, as though she had already lost interest in the subject.

"I really want to see you both."

"Oh. I was writing. It's a damned nuisance, my daily woman not coming on Sundays. I like to write every morning, you see, when I'm at work on a book. Otherwise I lose touch with my characters. Is it important?"

"Well, yes. It is rather. Though I wouldn't like to say it was more important than one of your novels."

"I hope you don't use 'important' in the reviewers' sense. I should hate to think I was an 'important novelist.' It opens up such dreary vistas of social realism, and starkness, and well-meant tedium." She opened the door of Jimmy's study. "Here's Mr. Strangeways. He wants to talk to us," she announced.

Jimmy rose from his chair. His left arm was in a sling. Without seeming to make any effort, he created a warmth of welcome, of solicitude almost, for Nigel, very much in contrast with his wife's off-hand manner. He had that magical touch which comes from inherited good breeding and acquired success; there was something hypnotic in it—soothing and stimulating at once.

"This is a nuisance about Hark'ee," he said. "The superintendent was telling me. Of course it's idiotic to suppose the old boy was trafficking with the enemy; but one can understand they're not very keen for him to stay in his job while he's still under the faintest suspicion. What can we do about it? The Minister is rather fussed too."

"I don't really know. I'd be in favor of hushing it up and keeping Hark'ee on. After all, it's not for much longer. And no doubt he'd be under surveillance of some kind."

"Ye-es. The fact is, I can't do without him. The division can't. Things are disorganized enough as it is, and the doctor won't let me go back for a week at least. I feel pretty much all right again, but I suppose being stabbed does take it out of one more than one supposes."

Nigel got the impression that Jimmy was angling for a little wifely comfort and solicitude here. If so, he did not get it. Alice Lake, sitting at the opposite side of the fireplace, hands folded in her lap, hardly seemed to be attending at all. Her eyes were abstracted, inwardly brooding perhaps upon the characters she had left upstairs in her writing room. There was an aimless moment of silence, which Nigel broke by saying flatly,

"It's rather a nuisance about that cyanide capsule of yours, too."

"Oh, my pill? Yes." The director laughed gently. "Though I must say I can't think what the police are driving at. Do they believe the—the poisoning was not done with that thing Charles brought along? I can't make sense of it. Or is it just what they call routine investigation?"

"Blount has some theory he's very keen on. Did you have just the one capsule—in the house, I mean?"

Nigel's question produced a queer change of atmosphere. There seemed something apologetic in Jimmy's affirmative reply. Alice sat quite still, her delicate small head turned away from them.

"But, my dear girl—" Jimmy was now addressing her directly, a faint note of exasperation in his voice—"*you* weren't on the Nazi black list.

Alice feels bad because I hadn't provided a pill for her as well," he explained to Nigel.

"I don't think Mr. Strangeways can be interested in these domestic shortages," said Alice in a voice like a tinkle of ice.

She has wit, but no sense of humor, reflected Nigel; a genuine satirist.

"You didn't know of the existence of this capsule?" he asked her.

"Not till yesterday afternoon."

"Did anyone know about it?"

"Hark'ee did. I mean, we arranged our suicide pact together," replied Jimmy, smiling gently. "I don't see how anyone else could have known. I kept the thing in a locked drawer in my dressing room. In a little pillbox with 'Poison' written on it. Just in case anyone should—"

"And the key of the drawer?"

"Oh, that's on my ring. And my key ring stays in my pocket. Except at night, when I put it on my dressing table."

"When did you last look in that drawer—look in the pillbox I mean—to make sure the capsule was there?"

"Ages ago. About a year ago, I should think it was."

"Did Hark'ee tell you he'd destroyed his?"

"No—yes, of course he did. On V-E Day."

The director shook with one of his silent laughs, remembering, no doubt, Harker Fortescue's ceremony of disposal.

"I'm sorry to be asking all these tiresome questions over again. No doubt the superintendent asked them all yesterday. But would you mind telling me, Mrs. Lake, when your brother came to fetch you along to the Ministry, the morning Miss Prince was murdered, did he stay long? I mean, was he here for long before you set off?"

"What you really mean," said Alice Lake, with her cold clear eyes fastened directly upon him, "is, did he go up alone to my husband's dressing room, I suppose?"

"Well, did he?"

"No. He was only here for five or ten minutes, and he was with me all the time and then we left."

"Did he say anything to you about Miss Prince that morning? Anything about having visited her the night before? Or their engagement being broken off?"

"I don't know that I care for these questions very much," said Mrs. Lake.

"You certainly don't have to answer them. I've no official standing in the case. I realize they're rather impertinent. But I do want to find out who killed that girl."

"Oh? Why?" Alice Lake shot it at him flatly, her delicate features quite impassive. The question might have been one of pure intellectual curiosity, for all the emotion she showed.

"My dear girl," Jimmy put in, "don't be so Bloomsbury."

His wife entirely ignored this, continuing to gaze full in Nigel's eyes as if waiting for a rational answer to her question, but with small expectation of there being one.

"Because," replied Nigel," "if Blount's theory is correct, a person I like and respect is guilty of a peculiarly atrocious murder. I should prefer that Blount was not correct."

For once, Alice Lake seemed a little disconcerted.

"Aren't all murders 'peculiarly atrocious'?" she said, hurriedly. "No, I suppose not. What they call the crime of passion—I daresay there may be excuses for that. Poor girl, she must have been very trying, by all accounts."

"All whose accounts?"

"Oh, Charles'. And Jimmy's."

The director, who had been stirring uneasily in his chair, said:

"Alice, if you persevere with these disinterested reflections on the case, you'll find yourself accusing *me* of a *crime passionnel.*"

"Well, Jimmy, I should be almost relieved to know you had it in you. Surprised, anyway. You've taken the poor girl's death so calmly."

"Why, damn it, do you expect me to be in a permanent state of hysterics? That's the last thing *you* would like."

"No, but—" She bit her lip. "Mr. Strangeways must find this all very embarrassing and uninteresting. Of course I know you didn't do it, Jimmy—" Her husband's face lit up, rather pathetically, but the light went out the next moment as she continued—"because I saw that poison container thing on your table, and you couldn't have used it after that because Miss Prince had taken her cup away before you came back to the table."

"It might have been nice," murmured Jimmy, "if you could have brought yourself to believe in my innocence without having to have it proved to you by the police."

Nigel was conscious, more acutely than ever, of an invisible gulf yawning between the pair—a gulf across which the husband made gestures of conciliation, tenderness, appeal, only to find the figure on the other side either disregarding or coldly analyzing them. Nigel at this moment felt genuinely sorry for Jimmy Lake. He said,

"I'm afraid it isn't so simple as that, Mrs. Lake. If Blount's theory is correct, Nita Prince was not poisoned by means of that container of your brother's at all. So everyone is under suspicion again."

"Oh Lord!" said Jimmy, in some consternation, "I *thought* all that stuff about the poison pill wasn't just routine inquiry. But why? It's mad. Why should anyone bring his own poison along when there was poison there, on tap, so to speak?"

"I can't imagine," said Nigel, who was inwardly reflecting how fluently—in his own case, at any rate—one lie led to another. "But Blount is a remarkably intelligent and pertinacious short of chap, and if he—"

"I think," said Alice Lake, whose hands were now folded deeper and tighter in her lap, "I think if you don't mind, Jimmy, I'd better have a little talk with Mr. Strangeways in private. Would you come up to my room?" she asked, rising briskly from her chair.

Turning back at the doorway, Nigel caught a curious expression on the director's face. Anger, was it? Or disappointment? Or fear? Or a kind of brooding disillusionment? A bit of them all, maybe.

"I'm afraid it's at the top of the house," said Alice Lake, as she started up the stairs.

"What a lovely house it is. Difficult to warm in winter though, I should think."

"Oh, we have quite a good boiler for the central heating."

"But no fuel or boiler man nowadays, I suppose?"

"Jimmy stokes it up in the evening. When we have it on, I mean. We ration ourselves to three hot baths a week. It's a nuisance not having a geyser."

After climbing several flights of stairs—the rooms on the third and fourth floors were all shut up, Mrs. Lake told him, for the duration of the war—they reached her eyrie, a workroom composed of two or three servants' bedrooms knocked into one. Here, from the top of the house, there was a magnificent view over Regents Park. This view seemed the only concession made to the aesthetic sense, for the room itself was bare, almost antiseptic in the impression it made upon the visitor. A large kitchen table, littered with notes and sheets of foolscap paper, to which Alice Lake's eye at once automatically turned; an electric fire; a battered basket chair and a few hard ones; a few built-in bookshelves; the walls were white-washed, and not one picture hung upon them.

"It certainly *is* a workroom," said Nigel.

"You find it rather forbidding? That's the idea. It keeps people—my husband's friends—out. I need a barbed-wire fence on the landing, really. You've no idea how, if you're a writer—a woman writer specially—people assume your time is all at their disposal. One has to fight tooth and nail for it. I don't mean you, of course. Do sit down. There are cigarettes, on the mantelpiece."

Alice Lake sat on the hard chair by the kitchen table. Her eyes roved once again to the papers on it, then she firmly pushed them away, like a temptation.

"Tell me, Mr. Strangeways, do you—is it my husband the police suspect?"

"I don't know who their chief suspect is at the moment. Honestly."

Alice clasped her hands in her lap, and turned to him full-face.

"You were asking about my brother just now. I didn't like to talk about him in front of Jimmy. That morning he came to fetch me—he did say something about Nita Prince."

"What did he say?"

"Well, there wasn't much time to talk—he was only here ten minutes—and then in the taxi to the Ministry. But he did ask me if I intended to press for a divorce. I didn't, of course, as you know."

"He'd been discussing the situation with Nita?"

"Yes, the night before. He told you so."

"I mean, he told you *then* that he'd discussed it with her the previous night?"

"Oh, I see. Yes, he did say he'd seen her since returning to England, though he didn't tell me the circumstances."

"Circumstances?"

"That dressing-up nonsense."

"Did you get the impression that Nita had tried to enlist him as an intermediary over the divorce?"

Alice Lake seemed to consider this as an abstract proposition, or a possible situation, it might be, in one of her own novels.

"No. Not exactly," she replied after a pause. "I thought he was sounding me about it for—well, for his own interest."

"He was still interested in Nita himself, in fact?"

"You could interpret it that way, I suppose. Yes, of course he was. But I'm sure he had no idea of holding her to her engagement."

"If Jimmy had left her, gone back to you, would Charles have married her, do you think?"

"Oh, that's pure speculation," she said, reprovingly almost, in her high, light voice. "It's difficult to think of him as the marrying type—difficult for me, I mean. But I'm probably too close to him to see him clearly."

Nigel came back to the point from another angle.

"Charles would actually do all he could to preserve *your* marriage?"

"If he thought it worth preserving—yes, I suppose he would."

"Did he tell you, that morning, that the night before he'd given Nita a last chance to give Jimmy up? Or suggest that he had?"

A look of fear and perplexity passed over Alice's face, the first time she had betrayed emotion during their talk.

"No," she said, "no indeed. There's a horrible implication in that." Then, more calmly, "After all, when he saw Nita, he would only hear her point of view. He hadn't seen Jimmy or me yet. He could have no basis for forming a judgment about our marriage—whether it was worth preserving."

"You hadn't written to him about it?"

"No, not for a long time. He was supposed to be dead, you remember."

"How well did you know Merrion Squires?"

The sudden change of front did not seem to disconcert Alice Lake. Indeed, Nigel thought she showed relief at it. She said she had gone about with Merrion a little, during the first year of her husband's infidelity, and he had made some drawings of her.

"I suppose I had some vague, silly idea of 'paying Jimmy back in his own coin' "—she put the phrase into satirical quotation marks—"but of course nothing came of it. I'm not really that sort of woman. Perhaps Jimmy would never have left me, if I had been," she added with a delicate shrug.

"I'm afraid my questions get more and more impertinent," said Nigel, smiling at her, "but an awful lot does depend on this. You used a phrase about your marriage being worth preserving—please forgive me, but do you honestly think it was? Now?"

Alice Lake turned her face away from him, towards the window, and the trees, the flower beds, the lake upon which it opened. There was a long silence. Nigel believed she understood perfectly the implications of his question, and not least of the tenses he had used.

"You mean," she said at last, "you mean, did Nita Prince die in vain? No, that's a vulgar, hateful way to put it. I'm sorry. Well, I can't really tell you. It's bound to take time for Jimmy and me to get readjusted to each other."

"And at present you're lost and miserable together?"

Alice Lake's mouth began to tremble. She plunged into her handbag and took out a handkerchief.

"I'm sorry," said Nigel, "but it really is very obvious. I don't want to hurt you, but—"

"What on earth has this got to do with the murder, with that girl's death?" she burst out resentfully.

"I think," said Nigel, picking his words with infinite care, "I think you suspect your—suspect someone you love of having killed her; and your suspicions make it impossible for you to take up the threads again with Jimmy. Am I right?"

Holding her handkerchief over her mouth, she went to the door and opened it. In a muffled voice, she said, "You'd better go now."

Nigel Strangeways descended the stairs, wrapped in thought. He did not leave the house, though, but entered Jimmy Lake's study again.

"I'm afraid I've been upsetting your wife," he said without preamble.

The director looked up at him keenly, but made no comment. He was still sitting in the chair where they had left him.

"I had to ask her some rather intimate questions."

"Alice isn't a great one for intimacy," said the director, half to himself.

"About you."

"About me?"

"About you and her. And you and Nita."

"She wouldn't know a great deal about Nita and me. She's—there are certain things she hasn't it in her nature to be able to know, or to imagine," said Jimmy in a brooding voice.

"So I'm coming to you for them." Nigel fixed Jimmy Lake with an intent gaze of his pale blue eyes. "Did your wife realize how much you wanted to get free from Nita?"

The question seemed to fall endlessly into the silent room, like a pebble falling down a well shaft. At last Jimmy broke the silence.

"I shouldn't think so. After all, I didn't fully know that myself."

"Until you *were* free?"

"Nigel, I could get justifiably angry about these questions. Still, I'll assume you mean well by them. Until I was free? No. I—well, there was always a part of me trying to get back to Alice; put it like that."

"You hoped, perhaps, that Charles Kennington's return would solve the problem for you? Hoped he would hold her to her engagement?"

"Ye-es. I must confess the thought crossed my mind."

"So you told Nita that this was her last chance?"

"Last chance?" repeated Jimmy rather stupidly.

"Her last chance to release you, to regularize her life, to have the marriage, the security she'd always wanted, with Charles?"

Jimmy Lake moved his tongue against the inside of his lips in that habitual meditative way of his.

"I certainly did sound her out, discuss with her what should be done now Charles had come back. But I didn't talk about giving her a last chance. Why, that sounds like a threat."

"Are you sure you didn't—how shall I put it?—didn't urge her to go back to Charles?"

"I wish you'd say straight out what you mean. Surely we know one another well enough for that?"

"I mean exactly what I say."

The director shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"I used no threats to her. You're talking about the night before her death, I take it. Neither then nor on any other occasion." He seemed to become aware that this was rather a stilted utterance, and grinned at Nigel. "And if I had threatened her, you could hardly expect me to admit it even to you."

"I can't encourage you to say anything incriminating to me," replied Nigel, attentively studying Jimmy's pale, finebred face. "I'm the Gestapo just at present, and there it is. The trouble is that Blount's new theory of how the crime was committed simply torpedoes all one's previous assumptions about it. I'm bound to tell you that things are now very awkward for anyone who possessed another supply of cyanide, particularly if he's unable to produce it."

"Meaning myself? And Alice. And Charles, I suppose. And old Hark'ee—he can't *prove* he got rid of his pill."

"But Hark'ee had no conceivable motive for killing Nita."

"So it boils down to us three? Quite a family party."

"I'm afraid it does seem to. And each of you had a very strong motive for murdering Nita."

The director settled his wounded shoulder more comfortably.

"Oh come, Nigel. Not Alice, surely. She'd put up with my behavior for five years."

"She'd put up with it, because she felt certain you'd come back to her in the end. But suppose something had recently happened which made her realize it wasn't by any means certain. Suppose she was afraid that Nita was on the point of winning, after all."

"My dear chap, that's nonsense. Alice—well, you've seen her and me together now; you must have seen that the returning prodigal hasn't been welcomed with a fatted calf."

"I've realized, after talking to your wife, that she's as much distressed about this as you are. She may be very much in love with you still."

"Do you really think that?" asked Jimmy, leaning forward to Nigel with an eager, boyish look which seemed to take twenty years off his face. Then, at once, his expression grew strained again. "Oh, I see. Loves me enough to have killed Nita to get me back?"

"That's one possibility the police will have in mind," Nigel followed up smoothly. "And then there's Charles. And a third possibility—" the director cocked his eye at Nigel interrogatively—"that it was done in collusion between two of you three. What about Charles now? You must have seen quite a lot of him lately. Does he strike you as very upset by Nita's death?"

"This is quite a new side of you," said Jimmy Lake. "Positively ghoulish. And I *will not* provide putrid tidbits of gossip about my family for you. So let that be an end of it." Jimmy was smiling quite good-temperedly, but his voice had the finality of a slammed door.

"Well then, I won't bother you any more. Except just one question. That copy of Clough you gave Nita—why did she mark one passage in *Amours de Voyage?"*

"Did she? Which passage?"

Nigel recited the first few lines of it.

"Oh, yes. To be sure. You mean the capital *A* in the margin?"

Nigel nodded. The director looked confused, embarrassed almost.

"It's the sort of silly thing one does—we did. She thought the character was like me, and wrote a *J* against it. She was teasing me about it. And I said the woman described in the passage sounded rather like Alice, so I turned the *J* into an *A*. Poor Nita—she wasn't really pleased about it; she couldn't bear the thought of Alice existing, even as an initial in a book."

"But she didn't rub it out, for all that."

"The whole thing is perfectly trivial," said Jimmy. "You surely haven't found a clue *there,* have you?"

"You've explained it," replied Nigel. "There was the possibility that you might have altered the letter *J* because you didn't want the people to get a hint of your real character."

"Good Lord! What misguided subtlety!"

"Well, I'll be off now. Many thanks. Is Charles about?—He's lunching with me."

"No. He went for a walk in the park."

Riding back on the top of a bus, Nigel was glad of the respite. The interviews had been exhausting, and he needed to revive his wits before the third, and perhaps the crucial and most difficult interview. He had to admit that he'd got very little further. Both Alice and Jimmy had given the impression of an almost pedantic adherence to the truth as they saw it, Alice especially. There had been an undercurrent of uneasiness, certainly; but no greater than one might expect in a couple still rather at odds with one another, still perhaps unable to throw off the fear that the other was responsible for Nita Prince's death. If one of these two was indeed the culprit, then Nigel could only salute the formidable skill with which the culprit had played his hand, everything apparently so natural and above-board, yet refusing to be driven or enticed into the open. Nevertheless, Nigel believed that, while one of them had sincerely told the truth, the other had concentrated only on giving the impression of truthfulness.

Nigel had been at the club for ten minutes when Major Kennington arrived, in uniform and extremely high spirits.

"I thought you would like me to come in full regimentals, my dear," was his first remark, delivered with much *empressement* in the full face of Nigel's fellow members lining up at the bar for their preprandial drinks.

"Sherry? Gin? Or what?" asked Nigel hurriedly.

"Dubonnet, please, if they have it. Full regimentals," continued Charles, "for I know it's going to be a courtmartial. I should have brought my sword, but I've mislaid it. Now what can I have done with that sword? It's too vexing. I distinctly remember brandishing it as I led my men in our famous charge across the Rhine. But afterwards? No, it's no good, my mind is a blank. Well, cheers, ducky."

Charles Kennington took a gulp of his dubonnet, oblivious to the murmurs of the serried clubmen.

"And how is the murder going?" he asked. "Any spicy revelations to dish up? Who's making the run for the gallows tree?"

"Jimmy, Alice and yourself seem to have drawn clear of the field," answered Nigel amiably. "But let's not talk about it till after lunch."

"Whatever you say. But not Alice. I can't have that. My sister must be above reproach. And how are things at the dear old Min? Shocking goings on the other night, I hear. The Reverend Billson caught *in flagrante dilicto,* touching off incendiaries all over the place. Archdeacon Fortescue up to some dirty work *in camera.* I seem to miss all the fun. In my day the Min was a very different sort of place."

A crusted and vinous-looking clubman muttered audibly to his companion, "Disgraceful. An office-wallah, of course. Can't think where he got all those medal ribbons. Looks damn fishy to me."

"Bought them, my dear sir," said Charles brightly to him. "In the Caledonian market. A very fine range they have there, I can assure you, if you're looking for a good buy. And quite reasonable. This little white and purple one I can particularly recommend—so amusing, don't you think? Just like a pansy."

The crusted clubman glared and snorted, struggling for speech.

"I think we'd better go up to lunch," said Charles to Nigel, "before the *mot juste* dawns upon our gallant friend."

Nigel was fortunate enough to secure a separate table for his guest and himself, out of earshot of his fellow members. At lunch they talked on indifferent subjects, and it was not till they were sitting in Nigel's room that the court-martial, as Charles had called it, began. Nigel told him that suspicion was now narrowed down to Jimmy, his wife and Charles himself, and that Blount's new theory invalidated Mrs. Lake's evidence of having noticed the container on Jimmy's desk, intact, only a minute before the murder.

"Meaning that it was not used for the murder?"

Nigel nodded.

"Somehow I never thought it was."

"Oh? Why?" asked Nigel, rather surprised.

"Well, for one thing, if I'd used it, I'd have taken jolly good care to drop it quietly on the floor when no one was looking; and then it'd have been found."

"I see," said Nigel, who had received a clear impression that Charles was telling the truth but not the whole truth. "Well then, suppose you *had* poisoned Nita—with some other supply of poison, I mean—why would you want to remove Stultz' thing from the room? Why would you take the enormous risk of having it discovered on your person, in order to remove it?"

Major Kennington answered quite readily.

"In order to keep the eyes of the police fixed on it; to make sure they wouldn't go sniffing around after some other source of poison."

"Exactly. So when the police do find another source—Jimmy's cyanide capsule, to which you three had access, and nobody else—and find this capsule is missing—"

"Then things look black for the old firm of Lake and Kennington," said Charles, grinning cheerfully.

"But don't you think it rather odd that, if Jimmy did use this pill of his, he should have no story prepared, to account for its disappearance?"

"I see your Socratic method is going to have me cornered in a minute. However, my dear Socrates, I will admit that indeed of a truth it does appear to me rather odd."

"You yourself did not go to the Lakes' house till the morning of the crime. You only stayed there ten minutes. And, apart from your sister's evidence that you were with her all that time, it doesn't seem possible you could have taken Jimmy's capsule out of a locked drawer and left no signs of breaking into it."

"It wasn't possible for a better reason," said Charles, a little pettishly. "I didn't know the thing was there at all."

"You mean, this is the first you've heard of the capsule?"

Charles Kennington wagged his forefinger coyly at Nigel.

"Now, now! You'll not catch out a hardened old poisoner like myself as easily as that. I knew years ago that Jimmy had bought himself a pill. I didn't know till a couple of days after the murder that he still had it—was supposed to have it still—and where it was kept."

"Did Jimmy tell you?"

"No, Alice did, as a matter of fact. It just came out, *en passant.*"

"She didn't tell *me* she'd told you. Still, the point is this. You did not know of the whereabouts of this capsule till after the murder. Jimmy has attempted no explanation for its disappearance, as he surely would have if he'd used it himself. Which leaves Alice."

Charles Kennington's hands clasped over his breast in that strange little dramatic gesture of his, then went out to Nigel; but there was nothing of the poseur in him now.

"Look, Nigel, fun's fun, but—"

"And the superintendent told me that your sister was distinctly rattled when he asked about the capsule. I don't think this is fun at all. Of course, the police might well consider a third possibility—that you and she were in collusion over it. That might explain a lot."

"I must say, this is the most cold-blooded conversation I've ever taken part in."

"The trouble with you three is that none of you ever tells an unnecessary lie."

Charles Kennington's eyes were veiled a moment by their long girlish lashes.

"Alice never tells a lie of any sort," he replied. "She's a regular old Bloomsbury bluestocking, a positive glutton for truth."

"She was telling the truth, then, when she told me that you and she had discussed the question of divorce, that morning you came to fetch her?"

"Perfectly true."

"And that *you* had discussed it with Nita the night before?"

Major Kennington did not reply to this. Nigel persisted.

"You see, when you and your sister came to Nita's flat the day after the murder, you categorically stated that you had *not* discussed the question of divorce with Nita. It surprised me at the time: you were so very forthcoming about everything else, but so very monosyllabic about that."

"What a memory you have! It's too unnerving."

"Yes. And I remember you also said, 'I think I put her mind at rest, poor sweet.' And yet, the next morning, the morning she was murdered, the poor sweet was in a terrible state; she'd been crying; she told Brian Ingle she was frightened, and said she had been given 'one last chance' to release Jimmy."

"What ho, what ho!" exclaimed Charles. "This is turning on the heat all right!"

"The police," continued Nigel, gazing noncommittally at the end of his cigarette, "could make a good case, out of all this, for collusion between Alice and yourself. Supposing you'd got in touch with her as soon as you returned to England—she tells you about Jimmy and Nita. You go and see Nita that night; you tell Nita she must give up Jimmy, or—. Nita refuses. You return to Claridge's and ring Alice, who is alone in the house. Nita won't play, you say. You concoct your plan together. Or perhaps you just ask Alice to take the poison capsule of Jimmy's and be ready to hand it over to you next morning. You are devoted to your sister; you'd do anything to advance, or restore, her happiness. And of course, if the police do by any chance tumble to the real murder method, you've got a personal line of defense to fall back upon—it's Jimmy's poison pill that's missing, and suspicion inevitably falls upon Jimmy himself."

"My golly!" said Charles Kennington, "I do seem to be in the toils! Now if only I'd brought my sword, I could fall upon it in the noble Roman way."

"I hope that's not necessary," said Nigel. "If only you'd tell me what really passed between you and Nita that night. There can be only two reasons why you don't—either to protect yourself, or to protect someone you love. And—"

"Jolly good reasons too, both of them. You can hardly expect me to help you adjust the noose with my own delicate fingers. Look here, Nigel—" Charles had risen, and was pacing restlessly across the room—"I say, this Bonnard of yours is a bit of all right. I wish—no, I can't; not yet. Have you read any of Alice's novels?"

"No, I'm afraid not."

"That's a pity. It'd enable you to see what she's really like. How shall I put it?—Can you imagine Jane Austen poisoning anyone?"

"No," Nigel answered, smiling.

"You see? You can't help smiling at the idea. The Brontë girls, now—they'd poison your teacup as soon as look at you; at least Emily or Charlotte would have. And why? Because they were passionate, banked-up, inverted, all-or-nothing girls. All for love. Now Alice simply wouldn't understand the feeling of all for love. She's madly civilized. And she's undersexed. She loves Jimmy, of course. But her passion is evenly distributed between him and her work. Always has been. She's a *genuine* artist; it's in her blood. Suppose she did lose Jimmy—well, she's got her other love, which is just as much in her blood as he is. Her life wouldn't be empty, just because Jimmy left her. You read any of her books—see how objective she is, and dispassionate; the *excesses* of love, the divine or satanic frenzy—she skirts them by, just as Jane Austen did, not because she disapproves of them or wants to ignore their existence, but because they don't come within her own experience; and she's too conscientious, too meticulous an artist—too narrow, if you like—to have a dash at them imaginatively. And another thing. Her equilibrium is a very fine one. She's aware that, if it were violently assaulted, it might well mean the end of her as an artist. She's always avoided, instinctively, violence and excess, and getting too much involved with other people's feelings. There's a natural fastidiousness—how shall I describe it?—well, she cultivates her own garden; she diverts just enough of the stream of life to run through it, fertilize it, without making a mess of it. A sort of ornamental stream it becomes, with miniature bridges and little tinkling artificial falls, and tame fish in it—all very decorative and unstrenuous. She's a profoundly selfish woman—self-centered, anyway. Her defense against feelings and people that would trample over her little *hortus conclusus* is to be amused by them, to poke fun at them. You see, in so far as she had it in her to hate Nita, she could get it off her chest by making a neat little image of her and running it through with red-hot needles, in a book. She wouldn't have to murder Nita. She'd get far more satisfaction from murdering her in fantasy. And that's what she *was* doing, Nigel. She showed me some of her new novel the other day, and—well, it just takes poor Nita to pieces, undresses her. It reminds me of a certain female collaborator I saw after the Maquis had dealt with her; you can't imagine anything more—more sexually deflated—than the spectacle of a bald, naked female walking away down a *rue nationale* into the middle distance, in high-heeled shoes. Believe it or not, Alice is in quite a state because, now that poor Nita's dead, her novel seems to have lost its impetus."

Nigel had listened to all this most attentively, watching the vivacious, triangular face of Charles Kennington while, his affectations and flippancy laid aside, he made what amounted to a speech for the defense. One seemed to be alternatively warmed and chilled by him, attracted by his taking up of the cudgels for his sister so loyally, repelled by the way he used them.

"And what about yourself?" asked Nigel, after a minute's silence. "Do you revel in the downfall of Nita, as you picture your sister doing?"

Major Kennington looked a little resentful.

" 'Revel'? That's an angry word. You are on Nita's side, I see."

"Yes, I suppose I am. I really prefer the people who bite off more than they can chew, the people who don't make reservations about love. But that's neither here nor there. What I'm asking is, how far your picture of Alice could be taken as a fair likeness of her twin brother?"

Charles' face broke into its ugly, intelligent grin; one could almost see him putting on the mask again.

"Oh, I'm not an artist like Alice. No sublimation for me; not that I usedn't to make some of my sitters look *rather* foolish, in my photographer days. But, by and large, I'm a vindictive little chap, you know—a whirlpool of seething repressions; not really a very nice character. On the other hand, I do sometimes bite off more than I can chew—I did get engaged to Nita, after all."

"But you still won't tell me what you and she talked about that night?"

"The situation. I can't tell you more than that. Not yet. You see, I don't trust anyone, not even you."

"What, to interpret the evidence correctly?"

"You're an astute old thing. Yes. And I'm rather hemmed in just now by—you know, can't see the grass for the snakes."

There was a knock at the door. A club servant entered, and handed Nigel a note on a tray. The superintendent's writing. He tore open the envelope, and read:

> Object *A* found amongst Major Kennington's belongings. Object *B,* possible remains of, found in ash bucket, taken for analysis. Ring me at once.
>
> D. Blount (Superintendent: C.I.D.)

"And talking of snakes in the grass," said Charles, "you look as if you'd found a viper in your bosom."

"It's not what *I* have found. The superintendent has been searching the Lakes' house. He has found a poison container, identical with the one you took off Stultz."

Major Kennington's eyes blazed. His voice was suddenly very cold and dangerous indeed.

"So you had me come here to get me out of the way while the police searched—"

"Yes," Nigel broke in, "it *was* found among your belongings."

Charles Kennington was out of his chair and at the door, moving with the fluency of a cat. Nigel made no attempt to stop him. At the door Charles paused for a moment.

"Now you've done it," he said. "Now you *have* done it."

Then he was gone.

Chapter 10

Major Kennington: Most Secret

Nigel was thinking of those last words of Charles Kennington's a couple of hours later. Charles was speaking truer than he knew when he said, "Now you've done it." Nigel felt the exasperation of a man who has put together a whole jigsaw puzzle but for one piece, only to find that the one piece left does not fit the remaining gap.

He had got in touch with Blount immediately after Charles' departure, to be told that the poison container had been discovered in a locked suitcase in Charles', and the lock showed no signs of having been tampered with. Blount was still at the Lakes' house, awaiting Major Kennington's return and explanation. He had said nothing to the other members of the household about his find, and agreed to keep silent about it for the present. What he and Nigel knew as Object *B* was the PHQ file which had disappeared on the day of the murder. Certain remains had been discovered in an ash bucket and were now under analysis at New Scotland Yard; the stove had been cleared out by Alice Lake two days before, since Jimmy's injury prevented his doing this customary chore of his, but the ash bucket had not yet been called for by the dustman.

An hour later, Blount had rung up again. Major Kennington, he said, had recognized the poison container as the one he had taken from Stultz, but would give no explanation of how it came to be in his suitcase. The key of the suitcase, he admitted, had never left his possession. He insisted most firmly that the container could not have been planted there by someone else. Though Blount had threatened him with a charge of obstructing the police in their investigations, and had made clear to him that his possession of the container put him in a very awkward situation, Kennington had remained adamant. Blount could, in fact, carry things no further at the moment. For a report had come back from Major Kennington's headquarters in Germany saying that he had handed in his own cyanide capsule, with which he was provided for his dangerous counter-Nazi work, before leaving the country; and at the same time Alice Lake's evidence seemed to make it impossible that Charles could have taken Jimmy's capsule out of the drawer in his dressing room before the murder.

Leaving motive out of the reckoning altogether, Blount was faced by two questions to which he had no answers at all at the moment. If Kennington poisoned the girl, where did the poison come from? If he did not, what was Stultz' poison container doing in his suitcase, and why did he refuse to give any explanation of it? For Nigel's theory of the murder method, provisionally accepted by Blount, involved the murderer's having removed Stultz' thing from the room in the Ministry where Nita had died.

Nigel was still sorting and re-sorting the evidence, still every time left with one piece which would not fit the pattern, when he was called to the telephone. It was Jimmy Lake, inviting him to supper. Yes, Charles would be there, but not Alice—Alice was taking the evening off, as Jimmy put it.

Nigel's first feeling was of positive apprehension. This, he felt in the pit of his stomach, this is it. Not that Jimmy's invitation was unexpected; after all the poking and prodding he had done today, it would be surprising if the criminal were not, somehow or other, forced out into the open. But Nigel could hardly look forward with any pleasure to the last act of what seemed to him a lamentable and a wasted tragedy. Nor could he be certain yet, with that last obstinate piece refusing to fit his pattern, how the tragedy would turn out.

As he sipped his sherry in Jimmy's study a couple of hours later, Nigel became aware of two things: first, that Charles Kennington was in a state of extreme nervous tension, and second, that there was a strained atmosphere between him and his brother-in-law—an air of antagonism little the less perceptible for being at present subdued to the polite conventions. Major Kennington was drinking heavily. Nigel had noticed at lunch that he was greedy, gobbling his food and gulping his wine unashamedly. The whiskey decanter at his elbow, he knocked off three stiff glasses in ten minutes. One might almost have thought he was nerving himself for some ordeal, or some dangerous enterprise; though his almost consistently light-hearted treatment of the whole affair, up to date, made it more difficult to imagine how he would deal with it now. Nigel had not seen Charles and Jimmy together since the fatal party in the director's room. How much the two had discussed the crime with each other, he did not know. But he could not fail to notice that each of them now addressed his conversation to Nigel alone and that they avoided each other's eyes, like two men who had recently had a quarrel and not yet made it up. It was impossible for Jimmy Lake to be discourteous—his good manners were bred in the bone, as it were, a kind of innate and natural grace; but the strain upon them just now was evident from his distrait air, from the rather forced attention he gave to Nigel's remarks. As for Charles Kennington, one could only say that he was impudent. The usual charm and *brio* of his conversation, which took the edge off its impropriety, were lacking; he was now, as he gave Nigel a wildly satirical account of Jimmy in his prewar public relations job, outrageous; he could not have been more savagely offensive if he had been trying to provoke Jimmy into some retaliation.

"I can't think how Alice hasn't brought Jimmy into a novel yet," he concluded. "He's *absurdly* down her street—the champion window dresser—he could dress windows for England; Test Match standard."

"I did," said Jimmy, softly and coldly. "That was my job."

"And now he's spent the war holding up his distorting mirror to the nation's morale—or whatever kind of mirror it is that makes the crooked seem straight—telling them how wonderful they all have been, how brave, how industrious, how democratic, how—"

"Well, I think on the whole they *have* been wonderful. Even Charles has behaved rather well."

"A good conduct medal from *you!* That's too dishonoring!"

"Let's go in and have some supper," said Jimmy firmly.

There was cold chicken, salad, a trifle and a tray of drinks on the sideboard in the exquisite, white-paneled dining room.

"Do you mind?" said Jimmy to Charles, indicating the chicken. "I can't carve yet. My shoulder. And Nigel can cut it up for me. It's an agreeable sensation, being quite helpless like this. Back to the nursery."

When they were all served and had started eating, Charles Kennington remarked,

"Well, Nigel, we're both *dying* to hear the latest about the crime. That's why you were invited, I hope you realize that. Come along, my dear, don't be bashful; put us out of our misery. Or have you got that forbidding superintendent of yours hidden under the table waiting to pounce on the bricks we drop? If so, I shall definitely hold my peace."

"You *really* want to know?" asked Nigel, scrutinizing him intently.

"Really. I can't answer for our host, of course."

"I daresay I can manage to answer for myself, Charles. Nigel must tell us as much as he sees fit to tell us."

"Well then," said Nigel, "I'd better tell you first what my theory of the crime is."

"Ah, it's *your* theory now," said the director, smiling gently. "Or is this a different one from the theory you said the superintendent had developed?"

"The same. Mine. I'm sorry about the deception. It was necessary, at first."

"He really is a *monster* of duplicity, Jimmy—this blue-eyed, innocent-looking temporary civil servant of yours. You ought to have sacked him long ago. He'll be the ruin of you yet."

"Oh, pipe down, Charles! Gabble, gabble, gabble all day—let Nigel get a word in."

"It was like this," began Nigel. He described how, that afternoon in Nita's flat, he had wrestled with the two unyielding questions—how was the container hidden from the police and conveyed out of the room, and why was it necessary for the murderer to get it out of the room?"

"I thought it might be possible to imagine a satisfactory answer to the second question. I found myself arguing like this: Why does a criminal remove the weapon from the scene of the crime? Because, if it were discovered, it could be traced to him. But in this case we had all seen the weapon a few minutes before; therefore there was no point in the murderer's removing it, and at such a risk. But the murderer did remove it. I remember thinking—it's a vicious circle, absolutely unbroken. And suddenly the word 'unbroken' put an image before my mind's eye—an image of the poison container *unbroken,* unused."

Charles and Jimmy were both leaning forward, following his words with the most concentrated attention, their food forgotten for the moment.

"Supposing Stultz' thing had not been used for the murder—not used, that is to say, except as a sort of decoy? At once the question, why did the culprit have to remove it, was answered. He had to remove it simply *because* it had not been used. It was the only logical answer to that question. It was necessary for him to remove it in order to establish the belief in our minds that it *was* the instrument of murder. For, if it were found *unused,* the police would at once investigate what other sources of cyanide had been available to the suspects."

"That's very bright, I must say," murmured Charles, who seemed to be cold sober again.

"And that answer, you see, also gave me an answer to the first question—*how* had the murderer concealed it. If Stultz' thing was used to poison Nita's coffee, it must have been broken. I found out that the sergeant who searched you had been a trifle careless; he did not thoroughly search the mouths of the suspects. Logically, the only place anyone could have hidden the container was in his back teeth. But if the container had been broken, there'd have been a few drops of poison left in it, or at any rate fumes of cyanide, which would have caused at the very least a severe fit of choking. Obviously the murderer wouldn't dare risk this. And nobody did choke. But if the container was unbroken, there'd be no such risk. Therefore the container must have been unbroken. Q.E.D. Mind you, there *was* the risk of having it found in his mouth. But no doubt he had some story prepared for that eventuality; he'd say he'd put the container absent-mindedly back in his pocket—"

"*Back* in his pocket?" asked Major Kennington sharply.

"Well, *in* his pocket, if you like—before the death of Nita. And, when the search was announced, he'd lost his head and concealed the thing in his mouth. Some story, anyway. But, if it *was* found on him, it couldn't immediately incriminate him, simply because the poison would still be in it. No doubt the police would in consequence investigate particularly carefully what other access he had to cyanide. But, either he was prepared to risk this, or he believed that no other source could be traced to him."

"Oh dear," said Jimmy, "my poison pill. Still, there was no difficulty in tracing that. I suppose the police were searching this house today in order to find Stultz' thing, then?"

"Yes," said Nigel, aware of Charles Kennington's fingers tightly laced on the table opposite.

"But surely the—the murderer—well, the first thing he'd do would be to get rid of it. At any rate, as soon as he realized the police hadn't fallen for his little trick."

"You'd think so. Of course, he might have decided to keep it, you know—for his own use, in case everything went wrong."

"Or to use on someone else," drawled Major Kennington.

"Or, as you say, to use on someone else."

"Well, presumably they haven't found it here," said Jimmy, "so we'd better all stop eating and drinking for the present."

Charles Kennington cut in quickly.

"This is all theoretical so far. What we want to know is, whom the police propose to pin it on. Always assuming," he added, with an acrid little grin across the table, "that we're to keep up the polite fiction that it's the police who are running the case, and not our Nigel."

He addressed himself to the remains of his chicken and salad. All three ate in silence for a little. Then Nigel said, "Very well, I'll tell you exactly what's in our minds. Perhaps you'll tell me if you can find any flaw in this reconstruction of the crime. There were three people who had a strong motive for getting rid of Nita Prince—the three people at present living in this house. Two of them, Mrs. Lake and Jimmy, had access to the cyanide pill; Charles knew about it, but apparently did not have *direct* access to it. Agreed? Very well. The murder takes place immediately after Charles' return to England. This seems to us extremely significant. You, Jimmy, had had the opportunity and the means to kill Nita weeks or years ago, if you'd wanted to. Why, then, should you wait to stage a risky and elaborate murder in full view of seven other people? Does it seem reasonable? No, let me finish," said Nigel, as Major Kennington began to protest. "The second piece of evidence pointing away from Jimmy is the use of Stultz' thing as a decoy. It was essential to the murderer that it should disappear, just before the murder. But it was being handed round for inspection then. So how on earth could Jimmy *rely* on getting it into his possession, without attracting notice? Charles, on the other hand, had brought it along; it was his; it would be quite natural for him to take it quietly back from whoever had it, at the critical moment, and then *say* he'd put it down on the desk or somewhere. But that didn't prove necessary. For, in point of fact, who did have it at the critical moment?"

"Nigel, this is—" began Jimmy Lake, in a broken voice.

"Alice had it. She was the last person to handle it that morning. Her evidence that it was lying on Jimmy's desk a minute before Nita died cleared Jimmy of the suspicion of having used it. *But it also cleared Charles.* Now that is very important. And it became vitally important when we discovered that Mrs. Lake had access to the cyanide capsule with which the murder was really committed, and when she betrayed great confusion at this discovery of ours. Now we know there is a strong bond between Charles and his sister. It seems natural that his first act on returning to England would be to get in touch with her, and equally natural that she should at once tell him how her marriage was threatened. And indeed, she gave evidence herself that Charles did ring her up immediately after his arrival in London. Alice now knows that only the most drastic action will save her marriage. You, Charles, have been at great pains to impress me with the idea that your sister is not a jealous woman, that she wouldn't go far out of her way to keep her husband. But when Jimmy had been attacked by Billson, he muttered something—the doctor and the nurse heard it—he was semiconscious: 'Alice. She won't let me go, darling.' Doesn't this suggest that Alice was more retentive than we've been assuming? And she did, after all, more or less refuse to divorce Jimmy. She and Charles agreed that he should see Nita and make a final appeal to her; and, if she refuses to give up Jimmy, they will take that drastic action. Charles will do anything for his sister—that we know.

Well, he visits Nita. He gives her this last chance to release Jimmy. She refuses, though she is badly frightened—Charles' appeal veiled what was pretty obvious to her as a threat. Next morning, Charles comes here to fetch Alice. He tells her that Nita won't play. They decide to put their plan into operation. Alice has got hold of Jimmy's cyanide capsule in readiness. They go together to the Ministry. One or the other finds an opportunity to drop the capsule into Nita's coffee. Alice quietly takes Stultz' thing off the desk at the last moment, while our attention is directed to those cover designs of Merrion's. She hands it, during the general confusion after Nita's death, to Charles. This again is most important. It would require extreme nerve to conceal Stultz' thing, as it must have been concealed, during the police examination. Extreme nerve, *and* the sort of familiarity with such poison containers that would breed contempt. The only one of our suspects who had the familiarity as well as the nerve was Charles. And he got away with it. Until the police found Stultz' thing this afternoon in a locked suitcase of his. Which seems just about to clinch this reconstruction, doesn't it, Charles?"

"Would you say that again?" asked Jimmy, staring at Nigel with ill-concealed amazement. Nigel said it again. He went on,

"This is terribly painful for you, Jimmy, I'm afraid. But—well, I couldn't help noticing, when I was here this morning, your wife's behavior to you—the sort of invisible wall between you, which you were trying to climb, and she—she was defeated by; as though there was some terrible load on her mind that prevented her climbing."

Jimmy Lake's right hand was over his face.

"Nigel," he said brokenly, "surely this is not true? I can't, I *will not* believe it. Not Alice." He looked up and gazed into Charles Kennington's eyes. "Charles, is this true? For God's sake, tell me it isn't."

Major Kennington was staring back at him, an indecipherable expression on his face. There was a moment's silence in the room, the sultry, toppling stillness of banked thunderclouds before the first clap. Then he said very quietly, "You should know how true it is, Jimmy. You should know." Then his whole mien altered in a flash. He was transformed into the alert, intelligent, dangerous creature Nigel had guessed but never glimpsed before—the man who had lived for weeks in enemy territory and hunted down Stultz with a remorseless skill as coldly frightening as any of the cold-blooded acts of that execrable Nazi. He said to his brother-in-law, "Now that Alice is to be arrested as an accessory before the fact, or a murderess, perhaps you will do something about it. Perhaps even *you* will do something about it."

"I? My dear Charles, what can I do? I'd do anything—"

"You don't have to *do* anything. You just have to confess. That's all."

Jimmy Lake sat bolt upright, staring at Charles Kennington. The air between them seemed to crackle with wordless messages.

"I confess? Have you taken leave of your senses?"

"So you propose to bluff it out, and save your skin at Alice's expense? Well, have it your own way." Charles turned contemptuously away from Jimmy. "Now then, Nigel. That reconstruction of yours. It breaks down completely at one point. You say that, on the morning of Nita's death, I came round here and Alice had her husband's poison pill 'in readiness' for me. Right?"

"That's what I said."

"And this was the result of a conversation she and I had had the day before? Part of a plan we'd prepared then?"

Nigel nodded.

"Then how did she get hold of the capsule? And when? The drawer was locked. The police are satisfied there is only the one key to it—oh yes, I took the trouble to ask Blount about that. And this key was on Jimmy's key ring. And Jimmy's key ring is always in his pocket, except when he undresses at night. *And that night Jimmy was sleeping at the Ministry.* So much for *your* reconstruction. Now, if you'll give me your attention, both of you, I'll tell you mine."

Major Kennington raised his forefinger, then lowered it slowly like a dueling pistol to point straight at Jimmy.

"That window dresser there killed poor Nita. I've kept quiet till now, because I love Alice, and as you say I'd do anything for her—I'd even refrain from telling all I know about Jimmy in order to protect her from the horror of knowing he's a murderer, and the murder trial and everything. But I refuse to protect Jimmy when there's a danger of Alice herself being arrested."

Jimmy was gazing at him, in a measuring, contemplative way, a quirk of a smile at one corner of his mouth.

"Well, let's see what *your* case is. I suppose the condemned man is allowed to eat his trifle," he said and, rising from the table, walked over to the sideboard. "You chaps want some? One of Alice's specialties. Nigel, you ought to try it." As he spoke to Nigel, his fingers played with the cork of the liqueur bottle standing on the tray beside the food. Unexpectedly the cork came out; the bottle reeled; Jimmy caught it with his good hand, then mopped up the drops of liqueur which had been spilled. As he did so, he suddenly paused, and whispered to them.

"Hello, what's that? Someone at the door, isn't there?"

Nigel went silently to the door and flung it open. A superb marmalade cat walked in, taking its time, gliding and pausing with the studied movements of a manequin. Jimmy laughed.

"Good old Marmalade. I thought it must be the superintendent at least."

Nigel wondered again at Jimmy's extraordinary knack for lowering the tension, for gently deflating a scene by disassociating himself from it—a champion spellunbinder. Nigel went over and helped himself to trifle, feeling slightly ridiculous, as though he were responsible for the whole pack of accusations and counter-accusations—which indeed he was—and as though they had all been proved farcically wide of the mark—which was certainly not so. Charles Kennington was, it seemed, less impressed. He had refused the trifle. He just sat patiently at the table, and when the other two were back in their seats, took up the scene where it had been broken off.

"If you're quite ready," he said, "I'll go on. We'll not discuss Jimmy's motive at any length. Nigel has a very fair idea of it. So have I. So, in spite of his prodigious powers of self-deception, has Jimmy. He murdered Nita because it was the only way he could get rid of her. Far be it from me to speak disrespectfully of the dead; but if a bulldog gets a grip on your throat, there's no other way to dislodge it except to kill it."

"Pepper?" murmured Jimmy, between mouthfuls of trifle.

"And Nita was, emotionally, a bulldog. She was absolutely determined to stick to Jimmy—though God knows why—and none of the ordinary methods would prize her off him. Jimmy had tried them all—every variation of the brush-off."

"What makes you think that?" asked Jimmy gently.

"She told me. That evening I went to see her. She told me everything. Jimmy had just made his last attempt, an hour or so before I saw her. He had tried to persuade her that she ought to come back to me. Oh yes, he put up a positively trumpet-tongued call to decency. She'd got to do the decent thing and fly back into the arms of her returning warrior. The sanctity of the engagement ring was touched on. Pity Jimmy had not thought of that some years before."

"Ah! So you are capable of jealousy, after all," murmured Jimmy.

"I won't enlarge upon the disinterested appeal he made to her better feelings—I have a gorge which rises rather too easily. This, by the way, answers your point, Nigel, about why Jimmy waited so long before deciding to murder her. Of course one reason was that he had the normal man's distaste for imbruing his hands with the blood of a fellow creature who loves and trusts him—I'll concede Jimmy that. But he also had waited because he was not certain I was dead, hoped for my return, hoped I would take Nita off his hands. I returned. But Nita wouldn't be taken. She made an appalling scene that night; she admitted it. The last of many. It tipped Jimmy over the edge. He got quite distraught, she said, and kept on muttering, 'This is your last chance, I've given you your last chance.' Nita had realized, of course, that my return endangered her. She felt Jimmy would leap at any excuse for breaking it off—any excuse that would salve his conscience; that's why she was so insistent that my visit to her should be secret; she felt Jimmy might even have his pretext if he knew a man had visited her late at night."

Charles Kennington broke off for a moment, took a gulp of whisky and lighted a cigarette. Nigel was fascinated and appalled. This duel in cold blood, between two antagonists so different in quality yet so equally matched, the one projecting his accusations like a series of venemous darts from a blowpipe, the other maintaining a cold and unflinching silence, biding his time perhaps for the counter-attack—where would it end? Nigel had set the ball rolling. He felt now like a man who, having dislodged a pebble, sees a whole mountainside rolling and tumbling down.

"Moral cowardice is an interesting thing," resumed Charles. "Here was a man who lacked the resolution to break away from a situation in which he was deeply involved. So outraged nature rose up and did it for him. Very macabre, really. He was in the position of a man with one foot on dry land and the other stuck fast in a bog, and he thought he wanted to get back onto the dry land. The Bible recommends you to cut off your foot if it offends you, and—"

"Could you spare us the religion and the morbid psychology, and get on to how I'm supposed to have committed the crime?" asked Jimmy Lake, in a light, wary voice.

"Certainly. I suggest you'd been carrying your cyanide pill about with you for several days, unconsciously waiting for a crisis which would compel you to use it. You saw the opportunity when I returned. You gave Nita her last chance to release you. She refused. From that moment she was doomed. You arranged the setup in your room very cleverly—I always said you were a good window dresser. The photographs on the floor, the cover designs on the bookcase—they were all there for you to focus our attention upon at the moment when you put the capsule into Nita's cup, and the moment when you pocketed Stultz' thing. You were considerably set back because I brought Alice along—yes, I expect Nigel noticed your consternation at that; for you'd always had a feeling of guilt about Alice, and you didn't want her there just then, and you were afraid that she might see through your little deceptions—she always could see through you. Well, anyway, you'd urged me to bring Stultz' thing along to show the boys. You were determined that Stultz's thing must be demonstrably the instrument of murder, because you knew your possession of another source of the poison would otherwise be discovered. That's where, by a strange irony, Alice so nearly paralyzed your plan. You remember, Nigel, that Nita's cup was half empty when she died, which meant she must have drunk some of the coffee before the poison pill was into it. She drank that part of the coffee before putting her cup down on Jimmy's desk. He then goes to his desk, takes the cover designs out of a drawer and, holding them for an instant between us and Nita's cup, to screen it, drops the pill into it. He intended to pick up the container at the same moment and pocket it, but something prevents him—perhaps Alice looks around—I don't know. Now at this point he was in great danger. At any moment Nita might drink her coffee, poisoned now, and the still unbroken container be found on the desk. On the other hand, he realized that, *if* somebody noticed the container on the desk after he'd moved away to prop up the cover designs on the bookcase, and *if* it were established that he himself had not been in reach of Nita's cup after the container was so noticed, then it would be proved that *he* hadn't poisoned the cup—poisoned it with Stultz' thing, of course. So what he has to do is to prevent Nita drinking the rest of her coffee till he has found an opportunity to pocket the container. And that's why he took her firmly by the elbow, and marched her over to the bookcase, and held her by the elbow while we admired the cover designs—a rather unorthodox thing to do with Alice in the room, and incidentally the first sign of interest in Nita he'd shown since the party began. When Nita's telephone rings, she goes to his desk to pick up her cup before answering the call at her table. Jimmy follows at once, takes his own cup and at the same moment—while we are all vaguely looking at Nita, as one does when a person begins to speak on the telephone—he picks up the container and pockets it."

Charles Kennington paused again to refill his glass. Then he continued.

"So he's brought it off. He goes to sit on Nita's table, in full view of everyone, so we can all see him very definitely not slipping anything into her cup. He gives us good measure by beating the wretched girl on the shoulders when she is choking with the poison, and telling her to cough it up—a masterpiece of filthy improvisation, that. And later Alice bears witness that she'd seen the unbroken container on his desk, thereby cosily clearing him of suspicion. All he has to do is to get rid of the container now. But you, Nigel, warn him off when he moves towards a window—I fancy he meant to flip it out then. So he has to adopt plan *B* and stick it in his back teeth for the police search. You remember how white and shaken he looked when he came out from behind the screen? I don't wonder! And how he pulled out his silk handkerchief to mop his face? No doubt he spat the container out into the handkerchief then. It's really rather funny, that." A quirk of some cryptic amusement passed over Charles' face. "I'm sorry to be so tedious and long and dotting all the *i* 's; but I've thought about the business a good deal, in my dimwitted way, and I'm compelled to believe this is what happened. The facts won't bear any other interpretation."

"It's a pity," said Jimmy Lake at once, "that you shouldn't have remembered one rather important fact, as you are being so conscientious about the facts."

"Namely?"

"That Stultz' thing has been found in your locked suitcase. Or is your theory that I—what's the word?—'planted' it there?"

"No, I don't suggest you did. We'll return to that presently, after you've had your say. Go on. I'm interested to know how our moral Houdini will try and wriggle out of it."

The positions were now reversed. Into Charles' eyes there had come a wary, calculating look; he seemed to be measuring up his antagonist, trying to anticipate the direction of Jimmy's first thrust. The director, who had listened with a certain humoring contempt to Charles' attack, now visibly gathered force and indignation. His fine, pale face still showed a bitter distaste for these proceedings, but also a new resolution to carry them through to the bitter end. He smiled, rather sadly, at Nigel.

"I've been hamstrung, you see," he began. "I've known all along that it would kill Alice if—if the truth about Charles and Nita came out. She loves Charles, she's bound up with him, always has been, more deeply than with me. I suppose it's natural Charles should try to save his skin by making up a case against me; I daresay I might have done the same in his place—"

"This is rich!" exclaimed Charles, his voice crackling with contempt. "This is the prime, peach-fed ham of hypocrisy! Well, go on."

"Your mistake, Nigel, is to have assumed that Alice had anything to do with it. Your theory that she and Charles planned it together, because she couldn't get me back from Nita any other way—well, it's awfully weak, really; surely she would have asked Charles to have a talk with *me*, try and persuade me, first? No, for some reason, old boy, you've entirely ignored Charles' own, personal motive. It's very odd you should—I suppose he's thrown too much dust in your eyes. Charles killed Nita, for the good and simple reason that she had been unfaithful to him. *I know this.* I'll tell you how I know it in a minute."

"We can hardly wait," murmured Charles Kennington.

"I haven't worked out Charles' method with such attention to detail as he showed in his rigmarole against me. But a liar has to be extremely plausible, and a murderer always protests too much when he's trying to incriminate someone else."

"Hear, hear!" exclaimed Charles.

"You'll alter this schoolboyish attitude soon," replied Jimmy stiffly. "As far as I can see, it was perfectly practicable for Charles to have poisoned Nita's coffee in the way he ascribed to me. At any rate, he could have put poison into the cup while it was lying on my desk, couldn't he? There was an opportunity?"

Nigel nodded silently.

"But how did he get hold of the container—Stultz' thing? I know that's a snag. Alice's evidence is supposed to have cleared him. Well, frankly, I don't know the answer. It's possible that Alice may have lied about the container's being on the desk a minute before Nita's death, lied to shield Charles; she may even have noticed him pocketing it. But I think not. Alice simply can't prevent herself telling the truth. I—oh, my God, what a fool I am!" The director's face lit up with intelligence. "I've been assuming that the Stultz container must have been removed from my desk *before* Nita died. We all assumed this at the time, simply because we assumed that it was this container which had been used to poison her coffee. But as it wasn't, then—yes, no doubt Charles quietly went and pocketed it during the confusion when she—when she was dying—or soon afterwards. Isn't that possible?"

Once again Nigel silently nodded.

"That's a very ingenious thought of yours, Jimmy. I couldn't be more impressed," said Charles. "But the fact still remains that I was not in a position to pinch the poison capsule out of your dressing-table drawer. So you're stymied again."

"I presume you had some other source of poison."

"Oh, I had a little lethal tablet for my private convenience, in Germany. But I handed it in at H.Q. there before I left. Didn't I, Nigel?"

Nigel Strangeways nodded. He had nothing to do, at present, but to watch and to nod from time to time, and let things rip. Sooner or later, one of them would make a mistake.

"Well, I daresay Charles had other ways of getting hold of cyanide. Maybe he had other trophies of the chase, so to speak. It's not my job to do the police's work for them about that. I can only say that it was he who was so keen on bringing Stultz' thing to the party and showing it off; it was rather like an army instructor handing round a live Mills bomb to a number of civilians—careless, to say the least. And one more thing. I admit it doesn't seem likely that Charles could have used my poison pill for the murder. But he could easily have got hold of it *after* the murder, when he'd come to stay with us here, *and removed it in order to incriminate me.* It's very interesting that the pill should have disappeared just when the police had changed their views about how the murder was done, just when they decided to look for another source of poison than the Stultz container."

"Have you any evidence to support this?" asked Nigel.

"Charles had always known I possessed a poison pill. The other day he asked me if I still had it, asked me where I kept it."

"That's a damned lie, and you know it!" Charles Kennington's voice almost broke. His small, triangular face seemed to have dwindled and wizened, like the face of a dead man.

"Oh, you made your inquiry in a very tactful way. But—"

"Did anyone else hear this conversation? Your wife?" put in Nigel.

"No, Charles and I were alone."

Nigel relaxed again in his chair. "So it's your word against his once more."

"I'm afraid so. And my word against his over his threat to Nita."

"His threat to Nita?"

"Yes. It's got to come out now. I daresay you noticed that a certain amount of feeling crept into Charles' words just now when he was talking about his engagement to Nita. Oh yes, Charles may pretend—he has pretended all along—that his feelings for Nita had evaporated, that he wasn't really interested in her any more. He even removed from Nita's flat the letters he'd written to her—yes, Alice told me about that—it would have been unpleasantly revealing if the police had read them, I dare say; might have put ideas into their heads. You'd hardly believed what virile passion burned behind that—that rather misleading exterior of his."

"This is most gratifying," said Charles, "I wouldn't have missed it for worlds."

"Nita *was* frightened, poor love, that morning. You see, Charles had cut up very rough when he visited her the night before. Oh yes, he'd given her a last chance to honor her engagement; he *had* asked her to give me up, but for his own sake, not for Alice's. He told her, 'If you don't leave my fascinating brother-in-law at once, if you don't announce tomorrow morning that you and I are to be married shortly, I shall make quite sure that he won't have the use of you any more.' Those were his very words."

"Did she tell you this herself?"

"No. I heard him."

Charles Kennington said in a startled voice,

"You heard me? What the devil do you mean?"

"After I left Nita that night—yes, we did have a terrible scene—that's why I went back to the flat; I felt I couldn't leave it like that. I'd gone to the Ministry and tried to do some work. But I couldn't. So I rang her up and said I was sorry, said I'd come straight back. She seemed to get into a sort of panic at the idea. I couldn't understand why. But it made me suspicious. I began to wonder if—well, if I'd been deceived by her all along. Anyway, I told her I wouldn't return, but I made up my mind that I would. I'm rather ashamed about all this. Of course, Charles is right in a way. I would probably have seized the chance of breaking with Nita; I'm afraid that was in my mind when I went back to the flat—hoping to catch her with a man. Hoping to, and fearing to. I let myself in with my own key, went quietly up the stairs, crept into the hall and listened at the door of her sitting room. It as Charles' voice I heard. I didn't know what to make of it at first. I listened for a bit. I heard what I've just told you. And other things. He was prepared to forgive her unfaithfulness, if—"

Jimmy broke off abruptly, closing his eyes as if trying to shut out some imagined scene. His face was strained, and full of anguish. When he spoke again, it was almost a whisper.

"The next morning—Oh Christ! I shall never forget it. Nita was in a terrible state. She didn't dare tell me that Charles had visited her. She felt she couldn't trust me, I suppose—couldn't trust me now not to use Charles as a pretext for ending our affair. 'Affair'—gah, what a word! I mean, if she told me that Charles insisted on her marrying him, was threatening I don't know what if she didn't, well, you can see what a graceful let-out it'd be for me. She couldn't turn to me for protection any longer; she'd no one to turn to. But if I'd had the remotest idea that Charles' threat was serious—" Jimmy's white knuckles ground into his forehead—"no, I *ought* to have known, I ought never to have let—but it seemed incredible that Charles should try and do anything with all of us in the room there, after showing us all the poison container itself."

He rose abruptly and began to pace the room. The other two were silent. Nigel was thinking hard. Charles Kennington huddled in his chair, seemed to have shrunk into himself, a figure almost as tiny as its own reflection in the convex mirror at the end of the room. Jimmy paused at the sideboard to pour himself out a liqueur.

"Sorry," he said. "You like one, Nigel? Peach brandy of some kind."

He moved back to the table, held out two glasses, their stems between his fingers. Nigel took one. The other, Jimmy put down beside Charles Kennington. There was a feeling of intense embarrassment in the room—the sort of social embarrassment that might be felt if a member of a club were convicted before his fellow members of cheating at cards.

"I couldn't come out with this before." Jimmy spoke to Charles as if they'd made a tacit agreement to ignore Nigel's presence altogether. "But you can't expect me to sit here and do nothing about it. Can you?" There was almost a pleading note in his voice. "I'm sorry, Charles. But you drove me to it."

Major Kennington's face looked small and sick. He said nothing at all.

"Nigel, I suppose it's no use asking you to forget everything you've heard this evening?" asked Jimmy.

Nigel shook his head. He was still waiting. It was not all over yet, his instinct told him.

"I'll look after Alice. I promise you. She'll be all right." Jimmy was speaking to Charles again. "Why don't you say something?"

From the figure of Major Kennington, sitting listlessly as it foundered and saturated in defeat, words at last came.

"I was very, very fond of Nita."

The words were spaced out; the intonation was high and clear, almost a mimicry of Alice Lake's voice.

"There's only one thing to be done now, Charles." Jimmy Lake spoke with a kind of veiled urgency.

"Yes," said Charles, "only one thing to be done." His fingers groped out, like an automaton's, towards his liqueur glass.

"I think—oh, damn this sling! Nigel, could you loosen it a bit? It's hurting my shoulder. This knot here—I can't get at it properly."

Nigel rose and bent over Jimmy's left arm, wrestling with the knot. For a few moments his back was turned to Charles Kennington. Then he sat down again. Charles' fingers were still round the stem of his glass. He now raised it a little, peering into the apricot-colored liqueur. He looked up, straight at Jimmy, his eyes blazing feverishly.

"Well, here's to the shade of Nita," he said. "May she rest in peace."

There was a queer little pause.

"Go on, Jimmy," he said, "you must pledge her too."

"Here's to Nita," muttered Jimmy Lake, his voice choked and hardly audible.

The two men drank, Jimmy sipping the liqueur, Charles taking one of his usual gulps.

The next instant, Charles Kennington was on his feet, his eyes glaring, his hands scrabbling at his throat.

"God! It burns!" His voice came in a difficult, scraping gasp. Nigel was on his feet too; but, as he started round the table towards Charles, he felt Jimmy Lake's right hand clamp down on his wrist with extraordinary strength.

"No, Nigel! It's better this way. For God's sake, let him—"

Charles Kennington swayed on his feet. He retched and struggled for breath, his face becoming suffused, his eyes fixed wildly on nothing. Then he fell sideways over the chair, twisting like a worm, and slipped away from the chair onto the floor, where he lay face downward and twitched a little, and then was quite still.

Jimmy's hand, still on Nigel's wrist, now relaxed. He shuddered violently, and sighed—a sound of pure exhaustion.

"Don't you see, Nigel?—I couldn't let you—I had to give him the chance to—it would have been so appalling for Alice, the arrest, the trial, hanging, everything." He spoke jerkily, pleadingly. "It was my one hope, that he'd have my poison pill on him. I'm sorry I played you that little trick with my sling. I had to give him the chance to put the pill in his liqueur, if he had it, without you seeing."

Nigel looked at him steadily. He made no comment, but only asked if he might use the telephone to call a doctor and the police.

"In the recess there," said Jimmy and, rising from the table, led the way. The telephone was concealed behind one of the white panels. Jimmy slid the panel aside and pulled the instrument out.

"What's the number of your doctor?" asked Nigel.

Jimmy Lake gave it to him. Nigel had just started to dial it when a voice behind them said, "Don't trouble with the doctor, my dear. Just the police. That's all we want."

Nigel whipped round. Major Kennington was standing behind the table, on the very spot where he had fallen and died.

A dreadful sound, somewhere like the miniature howl of a man in a nightmare, broke from Jimmy Lake's lips. The sound broke off, as suddenly as it had begun, and Jimmy launched himself towards the door. But Nigel's hand shot out and caught him by the shoulder, his wounded shoulder, so that he was spun round and sent staggering towards the dinner table.

Charles put himself at the door.

"Nigel," he said, "will you search him? If it isn't in one of his pockets, it'll be on the floor, I expect. But the righthand coat or trouser pocket is my bet."

"Stultz' thing?" said Nigel.

"Yes. In a manner of speaking."

"All right, all right, all right," muttered the director, his voice infinitely weary. He was slumped against the edge of the table. His hand went to his right-hand coat pocket. Nigel sprang at him. The end of taking risks had come. He seized the director's wrist before his hand was out of his pocket again.

"All right," said Jimmy again. "You needn't be frightened. It's only this." And he gently raised his hand and opened it; and on the palm lay a tiny, broken poison container.

Jimmy's head moved stupidly from side to side. His face was dazed.

"I don't understand," he muttered, staring at Charles, "I don't understand."

"It's a dummy. There was nothing but water in it. Quite wholesome. I'd certainly not have drunk that liqueur you poured it into if I hadn't known it was pure water. Mirrors have some use, Jimmy. Oh yes, I saw you break the container into the liqueur glass; when Marmalade created a diversion I was watching you. In that mirror there. You bet I was watching you."

"Ah," said Nigel to himself. At last that last impossible piece of the jigsaw fitted into place.

"All right," said Jimmy Lake. "All right, all right." After the long duel of wits, after seeing victory and safety assured in his grasp, and then so uncannily whisked out of it, he had no fight left in him at all. He groped for his chair and sat down. His head bowed in his right hand, he said, "All right then. I don't mind. I'd rather. It was the wrong woman I killed, the wrong woman I killed, I've realized it ever since, more and more. Oh, Nita, I—"

He began to weep drearily and hopelessly. Avoiding Charles Kennington's eyes. Nigel went back to the telephone.

Chapter 11

Put Away

"The wrong woman?" asked Blount. "Surely he didn't poison Nita's coffee by mistake for his wife's?"

"Oh, no. Nita was the intended victim all right. But Jimmy Lake had realized, too late, after he'd killed Nita in order to get back to Alice, that it was Nita, not Alice, he really loved. That's *his* tragedy. You know, in spite of everything, I pity him. He was torn in two. And no doubt Nita's temperament spared him nothing. She gave him hell, as well as heaven."

"It was an abominable thing, though, the way he murdered her. If it had been in hot blood—"

"Oh yes, I know. Still, I prefer that, of the two, to the cold-blooded way Major Kennington finally trapped him. Jimmy had a warmth about him; he didn't mind jumping into life off the deep end. Charles and Alice seem meager spirits by comparison."

"Aye, they're a couple of cold fish all right. But I think we'd not have got our man, by our account of it, if Kennington hadn't bolted him out of his hole."

The pair were sitting in Nigel's room, the night after Jimmy Lake's arrest. The glass of whiskey by Nigel's side was untouched. He had known for some time that Jimmy's arrest was the only possible conclusion to the dreadful and confused events of the previous week; yet, now it had come, he felt sick at heart. One ought to have no compunction for a man who had carried out so atrocious a design. And yet . . .

"I daresay you're right, Blount. Even then, Jimmy only had to sit tight. I'd absolutely failed to make him budge myself, in spite of the case I worked up against Charles and Alice over the dinner table. I expect he saw all its weakness. But then Charles attacked him. And Charles' accusations were plumb right all along the line; it was a bit too near the knuckle for Jimmy. He was fairly caught, so he decided to pin it all on Charles and clinch the case by an apparent suicide which would also account for the disappearance of his own poison capsule. It was a wonderfully bold piece of improvisation. And he might have got away with it, if only Stultz' thing had really been Stultz' thing. By the way, what is Charles' explanation of that?"

"Simple enough. While he was chasing Stultz, he had one or two dummy poison containers made, of identically the same pattern as the Nazis', but filled with water. His idea was to have these handy in the event of his being able to find one of Stultz' girl friends willing to betray him; he'd get her to substitute a dummy container for the poisoned one, so that Stultz wouldn't be able to commit suicide that way when he was arrested. Charles did, in fact, get at Stultz through a girl friend in the end; and she did the substitution. We ought to have realized that bit of his letter to Jimmy was just his nonsense."

"Yes, you aren't likely to dislodge a container wedged in a chap's teeth by slapping him on the back."

"So Kennington took the real poison container from the girl, and brought it home with the other dummy one as trophies. It was the dummy one he produced for your party at the Ministry, and the real one that we found in his luggage."

"I should have guessed that, somehow. We both thought it extraordinary that he should have been so careless over a cyanide container. And then there was the expression on his face when Nita died—I ought to have given more value to it—an expression of pure astonishment. A girl dying of cyanide poisoning, and the container disappeared, but there was only water in the container. No wonder he was astonished."

"A pity he didn't tell us about it at once."

"I think he was not sure then that it wasn't Alice who had poisoned Nita's cup. He knew that Jimmy had possessed a cyanide capsule of his own, and he soon discovered that Alice could have taken it. So he decided to work things out for himself; he didn't trust us to arrive at the right conclusions about that capsule."

"He behaved stupidly there," said Blount. "After we—after you'd produced your theory about Stultz' thing, it couldn't really have been anyone but Jimmy Lake who'd done it. He had the strongest motive; he had the means, and the opportunity. It was he who had done the scene-setting—the photographs and cover designs in the room. And then his refusal to go to hospital when he had been attacked by Billson. That gave him away. Why on earth should he fight like that against being taken to hospital if he wasn't afraid of blabbing out the truth there, in delirium or in his sleep? At home, there'd only be Alice at his bedside—or so he hoped."

"She'd probably have trotted straight along to you with the information, the little truth-teller."

"Oh now, Strangeways, you're a wee bit hard on Mrs. Lake."

"I don't like these cool-as-cucumber girls. Still. . . . You know, Blount, you'd never had got the public prosecutor to sanction the case against Jimmy on the evidence you possessed. Much too thin. Just little straws showing which way the wind blew—and counsel for the defense could have blown them out of the window with one puff. All of them. That capital *A,* for instance."

"In the Clough book?"

"Yes. Jimmy suspected the trap I was laying for him about that. He avoided it, as he avoided several others, by telling very nearly the truth. He admitted Nita had made the *J* part of it. He said she was teasing him; and, *in her presence,* he'd altered the *J* to an *A,* teasing back. It made it all seem quite innocent. But, in fact, if it'd been a joke between them, he'd have made a much firmer letter, a bold exaggerated sort of *A,* wouldn't he? Whereas the letter was so faint I hardly noticed it at first. Which suggested that Jimmy's explanation was false. Which implied that he *had* originally altered the letter in order to divert possible inquiry into his character, his predicament, and therefore his motive. But imagine crown counsel trying to make a brick out of that straw!"

"You're right there. And those words he spoke after he'd been attacked —'Alice. She won't let me go, darling.' You could interpret them two ways. Either he imagined he was addressing Alice, and referring to Nita, or the other way round. The business of the PHQ file was vairy strange," continued Blount, after a ruminative pause. "He did burn it in the stove at his house. It's queer, because it's the only attempt he made, till the vairy end, to draw any red herrings across the trail."

"It always did seem odd to me that he should have turned the Ministry upside down looking for that file on the very day Nita was murdered—if he were innocent, I mean. Yet I'm sure he was telling the truth when he said he had no suspicion of the Billson-Fortescue transactions then. My own guess was that he simply wanted something to take his mind off the murder, and this file business was ready to hand."

"You're not far out. I asked him about it this morning. What apparently happened was this: While we were searching his room, he was working in Mr. Fortescue's room. On his way to it, he took the In tray from the anteroom and brought it along with him. On top of the pile in it was a file he decided to work on at home that evening. He put this in his brief case straightaway; but, in his confused state of mind, he didn't notice that he'd taken up at the same time the envelope with the PHQ file in it. So this went into his brief case too. He discovered it there when he got home. In the meantime, that afternoon, he started raising Cain about the file, and the prints which Billson had been so slow in supplying. It was just to take his mind off of what he'd done. He says that, on returning home, he had a moment of panic. He'd never intended to try to incriminate anyone else. But, finding the Secret file in his brief case, he thought he'd destroy it—simply in order to raise a dust and confuse the issue a bit more."

"It sounds so flat and natural, I expect it's true. But it seems to be the only moment of panic he did have."

"Until I started asking about other sources of cyanide."

"Yes," said Nigel. "Why do you suppose he didn't deny possession of a poison capsule?"

"That's simple. First, Harker Fortescue knew that his director *had* possessed a capsule. Second, Mrs. Lake was in the room when I asked her husband about it, and her agitation suggested either that she'd used it herself, or—"

"Or that she suspected her husband of having used it?"

"Well, at any rate, if she had known that the capsule had been destroyed or got rid of somehow, before the murder, she wouldn't have been upset by our questions about it. Therefore Jimmy Lake dared not pretend he'd destroyed it. And there would certainly be no way for him to prove he had—we'd only have his word for it."

"So, as usual, he made no attempt to conceal the truth? That was his policy throughout, after the crime. He is a very clever man, and also something of a moral coward. His brain told him that criminals are often caught by their own lies, unnecessary lies; particularly murderers. And the moral cowardice, which prevented him breaking cleanly away from Nita, also made him afraid to embark on any *positive* falsehoods to us. He lay doggo instead; he shammed dead, like a frightened animal; wouldn't commit himself. Yes, it was all in character. But of course, it was a fatal inactivity, over the poison pill. The pill wasn't there in the drawer, and that meant one of two things—he or Alice was the murderer."

"No doubt it was the damning fact of that capsule which determined him to come out into the open."

"Yes. And his repressed jealousy of Charles. The emotion was mutual, of course."

"Jealousy?"

"I think so. The two of them stood in a queer sort of relationship with Alice. In a way, her twin brother was the great love of her life. I fancy this close relationship with him is really what was behind the failure of her marriage. If you'd seen them last night, Charles and Jimmy, you'd agree with me. The supper party turned into a pretty naked exhibition of mutual antipathy. The jealousy they'd repressed so long boiled over. It was pure jealousy that drove Charles to attack Jimmy so viciously; and I don't think Jimmy would have tried to make Charles the scapegoat if his instinct for self-preservation hadn't been directed by jealousy."

"You haven't told me yet exactly what happened at the supper party."

"I think Nita herself must have been aware of this jealousy, intuitively," pursued Nigel, "the way she played up to Charles in Jimmy's presence when he came to the Ministry that morning. And earlier, when she said, 'Jimmy is practicing being hardhearted. But it doesn't work'—she was trying to convince herself that what had passed between Jimmy and herself the night before didn't really mean anything, that Jimmy would never be able to harden his heart against her and give her back to Charles. I'm sure she hoped that the effect of seeing her play up to Charles would be to stir Jimmy's jealousy and make him realize what he would lose if he threw her away. It was *her* last throw."

"And the supper party?" asked Blount again. "You're vairy reluctant to come to that." His eyes sparkled frostily. "It got a bit out of hand, eh? You lost your grip on it?"

"You're damned right I did. It took me out of my depth, and—but I'd better start at the beginning. I'd been up at their house in the morning, as you know, and then Charles came to lunch with me. My plan was to sow the seeds of discord. I was pretty sure then that Jimmy was our man, and that Charles knew—or guessed—a good deal more than he'd told us, and that Alice suspected her husband of the crime. But Charles and Jimmy, for different reasons, seemed determined to sit tight. I had to shift them. With Alice herself I had tried the line that you suspected Charles chiefly. I got a clear impression from her that she had been worrying about her husband, though, more than about Charles. She was definitely on the defensive on his account—and it wasn't only because Nita's death had failed to bring them any closer together; or rather, it was clear her suspicion that Jimmy had killed Nita was widening the gulf between them. I suggested this to her, and her reaction absolutely dispersed any lingering possibility in my mind that she might have killed Nita herself. I saw Jimmy immediately after I'd seen Alice. I didn't get any change out of him at the time. But I did make him uneasy. Both on his own account and Alice's. I made it clear enough that there was a strong case against him, against Alice, and against Alice and Charles as accomplices. Then I left it to simmer in his mind. He would be compelled to do something, in self-defense or to defend Alice—that was what I hoped; he wouldn't mind Charles taking the rap for him, but Alice was another matter. Then it was Charles' turn. The first thing I got from my interview with him was that he'd tumbled to the poison method but was still holding something back."

"His knowledge that the container he'd brought to the Ministry was harmless."

"Exactly. I mean, I realize that now. At the time, in spite of a broadish hint of his, I didn't grasp it. He said he'd never thought it was used for the murder; and when I asked him why, he said, well *for one thing,* if he'd used it he'd not have bothered to take it out of the room. After a bit, I turned the beam on Alice. Charles then proceeded to give me a long and admirable character study of his sister, to prove she wasn't the murdering type, and couldn't possibly have killed Nita either by herself or in collusion with Charles. But he wouldn't be drawn further than that. Not at the time. However, the seed was sown. He knew he must act fast and decisively if Jimmy, whom he suspected almost from the start, was to be caught out. Mind you, I hadn't yet altogether dismissed the possibility that Charles himself might be the culprit. But then your message came, about finding Stultz' thing in his suitcase. It completely wrecked my whole buildup of the crime, which depended upon the murderer's having removed this container after the crime and then presumably either destroyed it or hidden it away. Charles' reaction to this discovery was very odd indeed. He said, "Now you've done it,' and tore out of my room. It convinced me Charles was not the murderer: no guilty person could have reacted like that. But unfortunately it seemed to clear Jimmy too. Not immediately, of course; I assumed he'd planted Stultz' thing in Charles' suitcase; I thought he'd been driven to act at last. But then you rang up and told me Charles admitted having the key of that suitcase in his pocket all the time, and said it was impossible for anyone else to have hidden the container in it."

"So when he said, 'Now you've done it'—"

"I think he meant the end had come for Jimmy, and therefore in a way for Alice. I believe Charles, up to this point, had kept dumb about the containers because he genuinely disliked the idea of Jimmy's being arrested, and he guessed that, if we knew about the containers, we'd have the missing piece of evidence which would lead to Jimmy's arrest. Not that he cared much what happened to Jimmy, but he did care for his sister's peace of mind—he didn't want to help us hang Alice's husband. But now he *had* to act, if only in self-defense. And at this point, I think, the other side of his personality took control—the Major Kennington who had hunted down Stultz. I think he suddenly realized he hated Jimmy—the man who had taken his sister from him, and then deserted her for another woman, and then involved her in a hideous crime. He was going to lay for Jimmy now. To reveal the truth about the containers might not clinch the case. Jimmy might wriggle out of it somehow; and besides, Charles wanted a *personal* revenge."

"So you were asked to supper?"

"So I was asked to supper. As soon as I got there, I sensed fire and brimstone in the air. Charles was drinking heavily—no doubt, to help work himself up to the big scene. The antipathy between the two of them—well, you could have cut it with a knife. Charles had obviously been taunting Jimmy, hinting at this and that, before I arrived. Deliberately getting on his nerves. In fact, he'd taken a leaf out of my own book; but of course he did it much more effectively, because he felt he hated Jimmy and despised him, and he positively enjoyed putting the screws on him, whereas I didn't—not one little bit. Jimmy was very cool and wary. He knew something was bound to happen; but he didn't know what. Well, we went in to supper. I decided to start the ball rolling, so I told them just how I'd arrived at my theory about the murder method, and then I sketched out a case against Charles and Alice on the strength of it. That set them off, as it was intended to. Charles at once launched into his speech for the prosecution against Jimmy. It was a venomous performance, I can tell you. And it presented the true interpretation of all the facts at Charles' disposal."

"Just a minute," Blount interrupted. "Did Mr. Lake know at this stage that a poison container had been found in Kennington's suitcase?"

"Yes. I brought that out as the climax of my case against Charles and Alice. Jimmy could not conceal his amazement. *Another* poison container! For he had in his pocket the one which Charles had brought to the Ministry. Well, Charles told Jimmy he'd better confess. And Jimmy of course refused to offer. So Charles went to it. He first exploded, very neatly, my own case against Alice and himself. Then he accused Jimmy to his face of having murdered Nita. He said he'd refrained from telling all he knew about Jimmy, from a wish to protect Alice. That decided Jimmy. He didn't know how much Charles had to tell, but he could assume it would be deadly dangerous to him. So he at once put his plan into action."

"Plan? To kill Charles Kennington?"

"Yes. I imagine it was not all done on the spur of the moment. But I doubt if he would have put the plan into action, even though it might well seem to account satisfactorily for the disappearance of his poison pill, if Charles hadn't pressed him so hard and got his goat too. Anyway, he went to the sideboard to get his second course. Oh, it was very naturally done—he gave a wonderful performance last night, Blount; it had me foxed. But not Charles. Charles was watching him in the mirror; he didn't trust Jimmy an inch. Jimmy pretended he heard something at the door. I went to open it. It was only his cat. Apparently his cat always comes to the door during meals, if it hasn't been let in to the dining room already. I didn't know that, of course. But Charles did. While I was opening the door, Jimmy broke the poison container into one of the tinted liqueur glasses. Charles saw him do it, in the mirror, but didn't say anything. He knew that container must be the dummy one he'd brought to the Ministry. Then Jimmy sat down again, and Charles resumed the attack."

"But why didn't Jimmy notice there was no smell of cyanide when he broke the container?" asked Blount.

"Ah! Just before this, he had spilled the liqueur bottle—accident—or—purpose—and got some of the peach brandy over his fingers. It was done, of course, to account for the peach-blossom smell of cyanide which *we* might notice on his fingers afterward.

"The poison, as Jimmy imagined it to be, was now all ready on the sideboard, invisible in a tinted glass, to be used or not used, depending on what Charles would now reveal. Well, Charles proceeded to state a damning case against Jimmy. You'll find it all in the full report of last night's proceedings I've written out for you. Among other things, Nita told him the night before the murder that Jimmy had made every sort of appeal to her to release him, and finished up by threatening her, telling her he'd given her her last chance. He went on to offer an extremely offensive character sketch of Jimmy and to describe the murder method in detail. When Charles had finished, Jimmy first pointed out that the finding of Stultz' thing in Charles' suitcase seemed to make nonsense of Charles' recent accusations. Then he got down to business. It was a masterly piece of acting. He hadn't dared to bring out the truth before, he said, because he knew it would break Alice's heart if her brother was convicted of murder. But now, more in sorrow than in anger, he must speak."

"Masterly acting? Damned hypocrisy, you mean!" growled Blount.

"Yes. I know. I can't get over my old affection and admiration for Jimmy, though. And he put up such a staggering fight. I *knew* he was the guilty man; yet I had to pinch myself not to be lulled into a conviction that he was innocent, that it was Charles who—. Anyway, the nub of Jimmy's accusation was that he'd returned to Nita's flat that night and listened at the door and heard Charles threaten to do her in if she didn't leave Jimmy and come back to him. He presented a picture of Charles as a crypto-jealous he-man in fact."

"But he couldn't have—"

"No, of course he didn't really go back to her flat. It was all one flaming but not unconvincing lie."

"The dog," began Blount.

"Exactly. The dog always barked when anyone came in, and the caretaker was quite definite that the dog had only four paroxysms of barking that night—Jimmy's real arrival and departure, and Charles'. Jimmy slipped up there. I now knew for certain he was lying."

"But how did he account for Charles having Stultz' thing in his possession?"

"Quite ingenious. He agreed Charles couldn't have pocketed it before Nita died—the evidence had proved that; he suggested Charles had done it during the confusion just after her death. Of course he had to skate pretty fast over that, and still faster over the question where had Charles got the cyanide with which her coffee actually *was* poisoned. He couldn't suggest Charles had used the poison pill out of his own drawer, because the evidence proved that Charles could not have got his pill, without Alice's help, before the murder. And anyway, he needed the pill to be in existence still, so to speak, because Charles had got to commit suicide with it. So he suggested vaguely that Charles must have had some other sources of poison; and he accused Charles of taking his poison pill *after* the murder, to throw suspicion on him. He even said that Charles had asked him where he kept it. This was another lie, I imagine. Charles protested it was, anyway. But Jimmy could afford to leave parts of his accusations pretty vague and thin, because (a) this gave it more verisimilitude, and (b) Charles' suicide was to vindicate it. And for the same reason Jimmy could afford to admit now that he *would* have seized the chance of breaking with Nita if Charles insisted on holding her to her engagement. It was a brilliantly timed admission. But he had realized all along how dangerous it would be for him to conceal his motive for killing Nita."

Nigel paused. His hand went out automatically towards his glass of whiskey, but he put it down again untasted.

"Well, Jimmy then moved to the kill. Charles of course knew just what was in Jimmy's mind, and played up to him. He pretended to be floored by Jimmy's accusation. Jimmy now had to get him before he made his comeback, because he obviously couldn't expect Charles to lie down indefinitely under what they both knew to be a false accusation. So Jimmy went to the sideboard, absently poured out some peach brandy for himself, then apologized and offered some to me. The other glass—the one into which he'd previously poured the liquid from the container—he put beside Charles. He did all this very openly. I should have been able to swear to it afterwards that he hadn't done any monkey business with Charles' glass then,"

"Peach brandy, eh?"

"Yes, same sort of smell as cyanide. He'd got it all planned. Presently Jimmy said to Charles, 'There's only one thing to be done now.' Charles still looked rather stunned, and repeated the phrase dully. *He* was acting up too, for all he was worth."

"I don't understand how Lake didn't suspect that," said Blount. "Surely he must have felt it was vairy queer for Kennington to be fitting in so neatly and tamely with his plan?"

"You'd think so. But I suppose Jimmy was too preoccupied in putting over the suicide illusion on me to notice much how the victim was behaving. He'd ascribe Charles' behavior to his being stunned by his own comeback; and partly no doubt to his being drunk—Charles had been drinking heavily all the evening. At any rate, having given Charles the cue line for suicide, Jimmy again distracted my attention; he asked me to adjust his sling, and he maneuvered it so that my back was turned to Charles for a minute. During that minute, Charles was supposed to have popped the cyanide pill into his liqueur."

"And you fell for all this?"

"Well, yes and no. I was convinced that Jimmy was working up to something. He was obviously setting the scene for a suicide. But I admit I'd no idea it was to take place the next moment, in front of my own eyes."

"That's how Miss Prince was killed. In front of witnesses."

"Yes, I know," said Nigel. "I've no excuses. Jimmy'd got me hypnotized, I confess it. A very macabre thing happened next. Charles raised his glass and asked Jimmy to drink to the shade of Nita. Charles was enjoying his little act no end. Jimmy didn't like that at all. Well, Charles took a gulp—he's a greedy chap; I'd noticed it before—fancy swigging a liqueur like beer! Then he proceeded to give a revoltingly accurate imitation of a man who has just taken a gulp of cyanide. I was absolutely knocked cold. I hadn't expected anything so soon, as I told you. And Jimmy got a firm grip on me, to stop me running to Charles' help—I expect he had some bad moments then, wondering if Charles wouldn't gasp out an accusation against him of poisoning the liqueur. And he said, 'It's better this way,' to reinforce in my mind the impression that Charles had preferred to take that way out. And when Charles was 'dead,' Jimmy confessed he'd done the sling trick on me to give Charles that chance hoping 'that he'd have my poison pill on him.' I then went to the telephone—"

"Just a minute," Blount interrupted. "Do you mean to say you made no attempt to break away from Mr. Lake and give Major Kennington first aid?"

"My dear Blount, you don't 'give first aid' to a person who has swallowed cyanide. He's dead. Don't you see?—I was as completely taken in by Charles' macabre piece of acting as Jimmy was. Well, I went to the telephone, and I'd just asked Jimmy for his doctor's number—we'd both got our backs to the table—when we heard the voice of the man who had just died of cyanide poisoning calmly announce that it was only the police we needed. That broke Jimmy's nerve, as Charles had all along intended it to. We searched him and found the dummy poison container in his pocket, broken. It was absolutely damning evidence. Poor old Jimmy."

"I'm not wasting any of my pity on him," said Blount.

"You're right, I know. But I can't help it when I think of Jimmy's tragedy—the way Nemesis hit back at him through the very woman—"

"Aye, the vairy woman. It's Nita Prince you should be sorry for."

"Oh I am. I'd never have got embroiled in this filthy case if I hadn't had a great feeling for her. But I don't mean Nita. Jimmy did it all for Alice; and it was Alice who quite unwittingly became the instrument of the Furies. It was Alice who wrecked his original plan to make Nita's death appear as a suicide, by preventing him from pocketing the poison container soon enough. It was Alice who, simply by turning up unexpectedly at the party that morning, shaped all the events to come; for her presence there, with the motive she had for hating Nita, was bound to put her under suspicion; and if *she* hadn't been in danger, I doubt if Charles would ever have troubled to bring the murder home to Jimmy. It was Alice for whose sake Jimmy committed the murder, only to find that Nita's death widened the gulf between them instead of bridging it. Jimmy had gradually built up a fantasy figure of Alice during the years when she was more or less estranged from him by the affair with Nita—a figure which seemed to offer the one thing Nita couldn't give him: peace of mind. But, when he'd released himself and gone back to Alice, he saw her again as she really was—a self-possessed, self-absorbed, thin-blooded creature; an amusing companion, pleasant enough, to be sure; but fundamentally an unloving, untender woman. And Jimmy had discovered in Nita what a really loving woman was like. Nita had been too much for him, I know—too loving, too exacting, too possessive. But when she was dead, he found out that her sort of love, with all its scenes and torments, was what he really wanted. He'd destroyed it, destroyed her, because he hadn't been a strong enough character to sustain it. But it was still what he wanted. The mere memory of it turned Alice into a ghost for him."

"Aye," said Blount, "a classical case of Nemesis."

HEAD
OF A
TRAVELER

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Chapter 1

From Nigel Strangeways' Journal

7th June, 1948—Paul took me over to the Seatons for the day. "Bob Seaton'll be in your line," he said firmly: "writes poetry, you know." I did know. I informed Paul that Robert Seaton was one of the most distinguished English poets of our time. "Delighted to hear it," he replied, unruffled: "he's got a fine herd of Guernseys. Charming house, too. But you wait till you see his dairy." I said that, for me, the high spot of the pilgrimage would be the poet Seaton, not a herd of cows, however well appointed. I asked what he was like. "Who? Old Bob?"—Paul was filling up one of those forms that farmers have to fill up, and couldn't give me his undivided attention—"Oh, he's a good sort. Quiet little chap, you know."

The pilgrimage was only to the next village, in fact. Paul's farm is just outside Hinton Lacey. The Seatons' house, Plash Meadow, is in Ferry Lacey, two miles away. Ferry Lacey: one of those messy Oxfordshire villages—picturesque rural slums mixed up with brash little red-brick bungalows and villas.

The first sight of Plash Meadow, at the far end of the village, took my breath away. A perfect Queen Anne house. Long, low; mellowed, old-rose brick; irregular but successful placing of the windows. A fifty-yard stretch of lawn, smooth and lustrous as green glass, between the house and a low wall which separated it from the road. Everywhere, on this wall, on the house, in the beds to its left, on the wall of the farm buildings behind, there were roses. Drifts and swirls and swags of them. A cataleptic trance of white and yellow roses. One was surprised not to see them romping all over the two Wellingtonias which spire up from the lawn, at either end of the house. "There's a bower of roses by Bendemeer's stream." Only it's the Thames, flowing past, hidden by trees, a few hundred yards beyond the house, which stands on a bluff above it.

"It's the end!" I exclaimed.

"Yes," said Paul. "The road doesn't go any further. There's a footbridge down there, though, where the ferry used to be, and you can cross the river and walk over the fields to Redcote."

He had stopped the car for a minute outside the gate. I could hear a distant roaring, like the noise when you hold a shell to your ear, but deeper; a dying fall that never died; an immortal sigh. Was it from an infinite distance? or a delusion in my head, born of this place and its trance of roses?

Paul must have seen me listening. "It's the weir," he said, "half a mile upstream."

Well, it might have been worse. He might have said it was the mechanical milkers at work, I supposed.

"You don't milk cows at twelve-thirty in the afternoon," Paul replied, and drove in through the gate. We got out.

It was like getting out into a dream. Walking past the front of the house, glancing in at the drawing-room windows, one might have expected to see a group of brocaded figures arrested in courtiers' attitudes around a Sleeping Beauty, the stems of roses twining through their ceremonious fingers.

The impression was sustained when the door opened. A dwarf stood there—a hideous creature in a green baize apron, grinning all over his face. Paul really might have warned me.

"Hello, Finny, how's tricks?" he said to this apparition, which replied with a series of adenoidal grunts and snuffles, then waddled in front of us to a door on the left of the hall.

We were in the drawing room. The spell persisted. A perfectly shaped room, windows on two sides, green paneled, Adam fireplace, rosewood and walnut pieces, curtains and carpet the faded magenta of Christmas roses, bowls of roses all over the place, a luscious Renoir above the mantelpiece—

"I see you're admiring my Renoir," says a deep voice from behind me.

I turn round. Paul introduces me to our hostess. Mrs. Seaton is very much *en grande tenue:* she receives me graciously, with the easy but practiced air of a duchess receiving a bouquet. A large, dark, commanding woman; big bones; rather beaky nose; sallow complexion; eyes smallish beneath heavy brows: plenty of social manner, but no charm. In the late forties, I'd say. She'll be a regular old battle-ax in twenty years' time.

I murmur polite and genuine admiration of the house. Her eyes light up, she positively looks ten years younger for a moment.

"I *am* rather proud of it. Of course, we've lived here for centuries—long before this house was built, I mean."

"You carry your centuries very well, Janet," says Paul. Mrs. Seaton flushes, unbecomingly, but not displeased: she is one who enjoys being mildly teased by a personable male.

"Don't be absurd, Paul. I was just going to tell Mr. Strangeways that my family, the Laceys, gave their name to these two villages. Our ancestor, Francis de Lacey, received the Manor from William the Conqueror."

"And then you married your house and lived happily ever after," said Paul. This, to me, entirely cryptic remark did not go down so well with Janet Seaton. She turned away from him.

"The Poet will join us for lunch: he always Works in the morning," she said to me in a different, throbbing kind of voice, heavily capitalizing the key words. It could have been just funny; or it could have been cozy, in a period way: but for some reason I found the remark really blood chilling. So much so that I rudely pushed the conversation back to the previous move.

"So the house belongs to you?" I asked.

"It belongs to us both. Robert's father bought it from my father, and then Robert inherited it. Old Mr. Seaton renamed it Plash Meadow; but everyone here still calls it Laceys. Are you interested in Battersea enamel, Mr. Strangeways? There are some good pieces in this cabinet over here."

I said I was. Though the Seaton-Lacey transactions interested me far more. Mrs. Seaton unlocked the cabinet and took out an exquisite powder box. She held it a moment or two in her large, heavy-knuckled hands, then put it in mine. As I examined it, I felt her eyes upon me, like a physical pressure or a wave of heat from a furnace. I looked up. Caught a most peculiar expression on her face. Can I describe it now?—The fatuous self-satisfaction of a young mother looking at her first-born lying in a friend's arms, plus a certain controlled panic (will he drop my baby?) plus something else, something indefinable, urgently appealing, almost pathetic. When I handed the Battersea piece back to her, she sighed, almost gasped, as if she'd been holding her breath.

"Aha, the ruling passion again! Showing off your bric-a-brac!" came a pleasant, quiet voice from the doorway. A young man was standing there, arm in arm with a ravishing, yellow-headed girl, smiling at us.

"Now, Mr. Strangeways, here are my two finest exhibits. Lionel and Vanessa. It's her half-term holiday. Come and be shown off, children," said Mrs. Seaton.

General handshaking. Close up, Lionel Seaton looks older—older than his age, too. Paul tells me later he was in the war, one of the Arnhem survivors, and has quite a collection of medals. But where on earth do they get their looks from? I am wondering. Surely not from Janet Seaton.

"We've been on the river," the girl says to me. "Lionel is absolutely mad. We tried to shoot a moor hen, *with* an air pistol, *from* his rubber dinghy. Of course, what happened was that the moor hen's intact and we're dying of frozen bottoms."

"Vanessa!" exclaims Mrs. Seaton. "You must forgive these children their shocking manners, Mr. Strangeways. They're very badly brought up."

She said it lightly; but a scowl appeared on Vanessa's face, making her look quite plain and colorless for a moment, as if the sun had gone in.

"We didn't have the benefit of Janet's bringing-up. She's our stepmother, you know."

It was an awkward little moment. But Lionel Seaton smoothed it over with an agreeably ponderous explanation of how the occupants of the rubber dinghy having to sit on the floor of the dinghy, and the floor of the dinghy being below the waterline, and the water being cold, inevitably the bottoms of the occupants of the dinghy, etc. etc. He added something about his good fortune in not having been one of those R.A.F. types, who had to spend considerable periods of the war paddling around the ocean in rubber dinghies.

He's a good boy. Has the self-contained, somewhat poker-faced air one often finds in the children of parents with genius or "strong" character.

Vanessa looks fourteen. Is actually younger? All-out hero-worship of her brother, who finds her inextinguishably funny, is protective, affectionate to her, and sheds about ten years of his age in her company. The dear child is quite unaware she is healing her brother's war wounds.

Presently Mrs. Seaton held up a finger. The throbbing note, the note of a gong discreetly tapped by a perfect butler, entered her voice again.

"I think I hear the Poet coming downstairs. Yes, here he is."

And then—oh dear, it was like one of those Great Occasions, the street lined with bunting, the band ready to play, the guard of honor presenting arms, the crowds all agog, when round the corner comes, not Royalty, but a stray dog, or maybe an errand boy on a bicycle, and scuttles away down the ceremonial avenue.

Robert Seaton trotted into the room, smiling vaguely at no one in particular, a nondescript little man wearing a crumpled blue suit, which looked as if he'd slept in it.

He seemed about to shake hands with his own son and daughter; but Janet Seaton diverted him toward myself. As we shook hands, the dazed expression went out of his eyes, and his quality began to appear. A quality—I think I can put my finger on it now—of almost supernatural *attentiveness.* I had nervously begun to sketch out my fantasy, inspired by his roses, on the Sleeping-Beauty theme. He listened to me, or so I felt, not with his ears only, but with his nerves, his whole slight body, and with an inward ear (his eyes looking downward as if he strove to catch the echoes of my voice in his own soul). When I had finished, he glanced up, straight into my eyes for a moment: an impaling glance.

"The Sleeping Beauty. Yes," he said musingly. "And the thicket of thorns. Yes. But have you thought"—he seemed to be burrowing out of sight, like a mole, toward some deep meaning of his own—"have you thought what really kept her there? Not the thorns, but the roses. She was the prisoner of her own beauty, of her parents' determination that she should be invulnerable and never allowed to meet her fate. The Queen took away all the spinning wheels, you remember. Yes, it was all the Queen's fault. I don't believe in that Wicked Fairy. The poor girl had nothing to do but moon about and admire her own reflection in the roses. So presently she went to sleep out of sheer boredom. I don't believe the part about pricking her finger on a spindle. And what's more," he added confidentially, "I don't believe in that Prince. He'd never have got through the thorns. It'd take the Beast to do that. 'Some rough beast.' "

"You *have* got your fairy tales mixed up, Robert," said his wife, who was now standing beside us. "Let's go in to lunch, shall we?"

The dining room. Dark, glowing, rich; not somber. A sheen on every surface—table, sideboard: two centuries of elbow grease and love. Empire chairs, candlesticks. Above the mantelpiece a portrait of the Lacey who built this house, after the Elizabethan manor, itself replacing an earlier construction, had been destroyed by fire. White roses nodding outside the window. Delicious food. The dwarf, Finny Black, serves at table: deft and quick, but it's disconcerting to have a servant peering *up* at you as he hands the vegetables. While he's out of the room for a minute, Mrs. Seaton says to me,

"Finny's a great character. An authentic Fool."

"Shakespearean, you mean?" Luckily I have caught the capital letter.

"Yes. He says the wisest things, doesn't he, Robert? Visitors always make him shy at first, though."

"He has persisted in his folly, then?" I venture. Mrs. S. looks blank at me, but her husband comes to the rescue.

"Mr. Strangeways is quoting from Blake—'If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.' "

"I think that's absolute rot," says Vanessa. "He'd just become a bigger fool. Which is what Finny has done."

"Oh, Vanessa, you know how that horrible chemical lemonade of yours takes the polish off the table! Wipe it up quickly!" Mrs. S. speaks in a voice of controlled exasperation. Vanessa polishes away with her napkin where she has spilled a little lemonade on the table, murmuring, "Out, damned spot!" She looks mutinous.

I ask Robert Seaton what he's working on just now. Before he can reply, his wife interposes: "Robert is writing his Masterpiece"—her voice is throbbing again—"an Epic Poem on the Great War—the 1914 war, I mean. Something in the nature of *The Dynasts.*"

Expression of blank misery on Robert's face for a moment. Writers hate having their current work talked about, of course. Good ones, at any rate. I murmur polite interest: say we've waited a long time for a new book of his (it must be nearly ten years, in fact). I tell him how his early work, his *Lyrical Interludes* in particular, was the first thing that gave me a feeling for poetry, when I read it at school. Paul, who has been concentrating on his food, looks up and says unexpectedly:

"Yes, but the best thing you've ever done is your *Elegy for a Dead Wife.*" He proceeds, after a sly glance in my direction, which says, plainly as words could speak, 'Oh yes, Nigel, even we ex-R.A.F. types can read,' to make a number of extremely sensible and sensitive remarks about this poem. Robert Seaton glows visibly. His rather ordinary, plain, worried little face becomes suffused, as it were from within, by a beautiful tenderness. Extraordinary transfiguration.

"It's a very painful poem," says Janet Seaton; then compresses her lips; then adds, as if the words forced their way through her lips willy-nilly, "For me, at any rate."

An exceedingly embarrassing silence. The "dead wife" of the *Elegy,* Lionel's and Vanessa's mother, still has power to haunt, then. I am suddenly consumed by curiosity to know all about her. Lionel breaks the silence:

"I say, d'you remember that Irish poet who came to stay, just before the war? You know, Dad—Peadar Mayo. 'Will I tell ya what's wrong with yer pooums, Seaton? They're not bad pooums, mind ya. But ya don't do what *I* do in me pooutry—ya don't tear yer heart out and lay it, raw and bleedin', on the page before ya. All this bejooled reticence of yours—ta hell with it, I say.' "

Robert Seaton chuckled. "Ah yes, he was a wild man. And then he went on to recite my *Elegy* to me, with tears pouring down his cheeks."

After lunch, he took me round the garden, etc. At back of house, which is L-shaped, the kitchen and servants' quarters occupying the horizontal stroke of the L, there's a large grassed court, with a whacking great chestnut tree in the middle. Beyond the courtyard a row of farm buildings—loose boxes, cow stalls, cart shed, the dairy, all under a long, lichened tile roof which has weathered to a Donegal-tweed pattern. On the left of the courtyard, facing the servants' quarters across the width of it, but detached from the house, a magnificent tithe barn. Seaton told me he'd turned it into a cottage and rented it to some friends called Torrance—a painter and his daughter: they were coming in to tea later.

We walked across the court, round the end of the farm buildings, into a walled orchard. In the near corner of it, a dozen yards or so wired off for poultry. The poet stood gazing intently at his hens for a minute: I waited respectfully: at last he said, with a curious little sideways glance at me, half quizzical, half abstracted,

"Hens always do look so much at a loose end, don't they?" His fine, deep voice brought it out so seriously, I couldn't help smiling. Well, no doubt it was just Keats over again with his sparrow picking about in the gravel. I asked if he looked after them and the cows himself. He said he used to, but he'd lost interest in them: he had a cowman and a gardener again now: he milked the cows sometimes still—found it "soothing."

Over the orchard, through a finely wrought iron gate in the brick wall, into the meadow beyond. The famous Guernseys were grazing there, looking like Noah's Ark cows. Away on our left, a thick wood; on our right, below the pastures, the Thames. All wonderfully peaceful and well laid out for the eye.

"I thought of writing an English Georgic when I came back here. But I'm no farmer really, and Nature rather bores me *qua* Nature."

"When you came back?"

"Yes. After my father and elder brother died, I came in for the place. And the money. Very handy. Poets don't enjoy short commons any more than anyone else. Only it was too late. That's where we bathe, just down there. I'll show you."

I forebore from asking any of the questions which this last speech of his stirred up in my mind. He hadn't really been speaking to me at all. We sauntered down to the river; saw the place where the bank shelved gradually down into a natural bathing pool; climbed up the bluff a bit further on, Seaton pointing out the vestiges of the terraced garden of the Elizabethan manor house, which had stood at the top of the bluff. Then we were in the great courtyard again. Boughs of the chestnut were being violently agitated. An idiot face mopped and mowed at us from between the candelabra of blossom.

"Finny's always climbing that tree," said Robert Seaton. "Climbs like a monkey. Extraordinarily powerful forearms: I daresay you noticed it when he was waiting at table."

The appropriate comment failing me, I asked to see the dairy. It stands at the end of the row of farm buildings nearest the old tithe barn. Obviously no expense spared. Separator, pasteurizer, refrigerator, cheese molds, butter dryer and the rest of it, all very bright and hygienic. Windows high up, floor and walls tiled, with good drainage so that the place can be sluiced down by hose. Robert Seaton points out all the advantages, in a burst of animation; then relapses into his companionable but abstracted mood. Can't keep his mind away from the epic of the Great War for long, I suppose: though I must say it's an odd subject for Robert Seaton.

We putter about a little longer. He shows me a well-equipped workshop and some unfinished articles of furniture he'd been making. I notice the dust is thick on them. Here too I get the impression of an only child of rich parents, given every toy that money can buy, and bored with the whole lot of them. I see a remarkably fine piece of wood carving lying on a bench, ask him if it's his work.

"No, Mara Torrance did that. She's got a gift, hasn't she?" Peering closer at the object, I get a shock: in the midst of the leaves and fruits carved out on the wood, intertwined with and fluently continuing their pattern, a nakedly Priapic scene hit my eye. And—what shook me most—the bearded face of the Satyr in it, tiny though it was, somehow conveyed an uncanny resemblance to no less a person than the poet, Robert Seaton. Involuntarily I glanced up at him. He met my eye firmly. The look of profound sadness, which always seems lurking just behind his features, ready to spring out and possess them, reappeared. He said,

"It's by way of being autotherapy, you know." I didn't know, of course. But there is a certain delicate dignity about Seaton, I find, which discourages even my inordinate curiosity from probing into his affairs.

Presently he leaves me to my own devices. I decide to look at the flower garden before rejoining the rest of the party. Walk past the barn, along a grass path lined with Irish yews and standard roses alternately, toward a summerhouse at its far end. One of those revolving ones: its back has been turned to the path. I hear voices from inside. Been repressing my inquisitiveness too long: can't help listening. Lionel Seaton's voice, and one I do not recognize; a female voice, cool, husky and—no other word for it—gloating. As follows:

Unknown Female: "So you'd do anything for me, would you, darling Lionel? Anything? I wonder do you really mean that?"

Lionel Seaton: "You know what I want to do."

U.F.: "Oh yes. I'm to be—reclaimed. As if I were a marsh, or something. But suppose I don't want to be reclaimed?"

L.S.: "Quite happy as you are, eh?"

U.F.: "I have my moments. What more can anyone expect?"

L.S.: "A great deal, my dear girl. And you know it. Love: marriage: children. A normal ordinary life."

U.F.: "Oh, how dull you make it sound!"

L.S.: "I've had enough drama the last five years. Give me the bowler hat, the eight-thirty and the slippers by the fire."

U.F.: "You can have them. But *I'm* not interested. You and your dreary domesticity! No, I'm going to make a splash before I'm dead. I'll—"

L.S.: "A splash! Out of a bottle. That's all you—. No you don't, my girl! I'm rather good at unarmed combat, so you can just sheathe those long red nails of yours again."

U.F.: "No, you're not so dull now . . . Well, go on. Start reclaiming me . . . Come on, my little Arnhem hero, don't be frightened."

I judge it time to retire. Well, well. The lady is a holy terror, as my dear Superintendent Blount would say. But I fancy she has met her match.

At tea, an hour later, I meet her. She walks across the lawn to where we are sitting in the shade of one of the enormous trees; a big, lumpish, rather dirty-looking man with her. I am introduced to Rennell Torrance and his daughter, Mara. Recognize the voice in the summerhouse as soon as she speaks. Dark, lank hair (why do all females connected with Art look as if they'd poured a bucket of varnish over their heads and forgotten to use a comb?): thick, magnolia-white skin: restless fingers: chain smoker? a bit of a dipso?

She holds me with a long, long stare from her slightly protuberant eyes. I can feel them on my face after I've turned my own away. During tea, she and Lionel pointedly refrain from mutual glances. Mrs. Seaton, I notice, keeps a weather eye lifting on them. Faintly uneasy atmosphere all round. Rennell Torrance holds the floor with a long diatribe against the "fashionable" English painters of the day—Matthew Smith, Sutherland, Hichens, Christopher Wood, Frances Hodgkin, all come under the hammer, regardless of age and sex. We've got to throw off the French influence and go back to Samuel Palmer. A disgruntled man, this Torrance, and presumably a failure himself as a painter. But he has a certain *panache* in his talk. After he'd blown off for ten minutes or so, he noticed my presence and asked what I was interested in.

"Crime," I said.

The man's eyes flickered toward his daughter, then back to me. His face had taken on a different expression—wary? stupid?

"What? You mean you read detective novels?"

"No, he lives them," said Paul. "He's hand in glove with Scotland Yard. So watch your step, all of you."

Vanessa Seaton clapped her hands gaily. "I say, that's wizard! When

Torrance bumps off his rival painters, Mr. Strangeways will track him down."

"They're dead, most of 'em, already. And stinking," said Torrance.

Mara, staring hard at me again, asked me if I specialized in any particular branch of crime. Mrs. Seaton said, very quickly, she was sure I didn't want to talk shop.

"But I'm interested," said Mara, in a whining, little-girl sort of voice.

"Well, I've helped in a number of murder investigations."

The extraordinary tension, which seemed to have come into the air at Mara Torrance's last remarks, relaxed a little. Robert Seaton, very wide awake now, almost quivering with interest, like a terrier at a rathole, said:

"It must be fascinating. The detonating point, I mean. The point at which a given man or woman bursts into flame. I suppose it varies enormously."

"I'd like to see Lionel burst into flame," said Vanessa, giggling. "He'd burn with a beautiful orange glow."

"A pure white radiance," murmured Miss Torrance, with a rather disagreeable emphasis on "pure."

Lionel threw a cushion at his sister. "But most murders are premeditated, not sudden outbreaks of passion, aren't they?"

"This is a very morbid conversation, children," said Mrs. Seaton. Her husband did not take the hint.

"That's not what I mean, Lionel," he pursued. "Every murder is an act of violence, of passion, however long it's been premeditated. No, I'm talking about the flash point in every human being. Look—you may wish to get rid of someone, some intolerable situation: you lay your plans in fantasy; you're not serious about it, or you think you aren't: you imagine your weapon, your opportunity, your alibi, and so on: but all the time you're laying a train in reality. And then a moment comes when you find the train has been lit, the spark is creeping up it, you can't stop the explosion, now. You're doomed to act what you have dreamed."

"Oo-er," exclaimed Vanessa. "You are creepy, Daddy!"

I said something to the effect that the flash point would depend on whether the murder you planned in imagination was consistent with your own personality. If you planned a murder from the wrong motive, i.e. a motive unconnected with the strongest element of your personality, with your ruling passion, the train would never be lit.

"But nobody would contemplate a murder unless what you call his ruling passion was involved," said Paul, very sensibly. "This begins to get interesting," Mara Torrance drawled. "Tell us what motive you think each of us would have, strong enough to push us over the edge."

I said I didn't know any of them well enough. The young woman made an eeny-meeny-miny-mo movement with her cigarette. It pointed at Mrs. Seaton.

"Come on, Janet. Mr. Strangeways doesn't know us well enough. So we'll tell him. You start."

"My dear Mara, I don't like these truth games. They always end in tears."

"Well, I'll speak for you, then. It's easy. Janet's ruling passion is Plash Meadow and all that therein is. She'd kill anyone to protect it. You next, Paul."

"I'm the purely altruistic type. I'd murder for the good of humanity. I'd like to get the leading politicians of the Great Powers into a room, and point a tommy gun at them, and tell them that, if they didn't come to an agreement within three hours to abolish the atom bomb, they'd have had it."

"Good enough. What about you, Father?"

Rennell Torrance mopped his lard-colored face. "I'm an Artist. I should only be interested in murder as an *acte gratuit.* I'd—"

"Hmph. Or if someone came between you and your creature comforts," interrupted his daughter, with a sort of humoring contempt. "You'd kill out of panic. Or perhaps for gain, if it seemed fairly safe, and there was really enough to be gained. Now Robert *would* kill for his art, wouldn't you, Robert?"

"You're probably right, my dear," said the Poet mildly. "Only I could never bring myself to facing my victim. It'd have to be one of those long-range murders—you know, the cyanide pill inserted in the bottle of aspirin tablets."

Vanessa, who had been brooding in a cloud of tawny hair, remarked meditatively, "I would like to poison Miss Glubb, our chemistry mistress. Some very slow poison. I would like to see her writhing at my feet—"

"Vanessa!—"

"—and just as she was about to expire, I'd give her an antidote. Or the stomach pump. How exactly does a stomach pump work, Mr. Strangeways?"

"You could use one on your own tum to advantage," said Lionel, prodding his sister's stomach. "It's really revolting, the way you swell up after every meal."

"Oh, do shut up, Lionel, you're horrible! And I'm *not* greedy."

"So we're left with Lionel," said Mara. "What would the *chevalier sans peur et sans reproche* do murder for?"

"Well, I might wring your neck one day, when you're in a specially exasperating mood."

"Ah, yes. Crime of passion. That's got you taped," she replied with a shamelessly long, deep look at him.

There was a silence on the lawn. Wood pigeons cooed up above. I could hear the ground bass of the weir.

"Nobody has asked me what *I'd* do murder for," said Mara Torrance.

Nobody offered to, even now.

"Revenge," she said.

"Oh, goody," said Vanessa. "Like me and Miss Glubb."

Finny Black came trotting up to remove the tea things.

"And what about our Finny?" drawled Mara.

Mrs. Seaton turned upon her formidably. "Mara, I absolutely forbid you—you know Finny's not—"

"All right, all right. Finny's a piece of Plash Meadow, and mustn't be disturbed. I know. Aren't you, Finny?"

The dwarf clucked and beamed at Mara Torrance. When he'd returned into the house, Robert Seaton turned to me and said,

"It's quite an interesting point. Finny will copy any action he has seen. That's how my wife trained him."

"You mean," said I, "if he actually saw a murder committed, he might go and commit an identical one on another victim."

Robert Seaton nodded. His wife got a firm grip on the conversation and turned it in another direction. It was very amiable, carefree, placid, from now on. An hour later Paul and I left. They stood on the drive, waving good-by: the good poet, embowered in his roses, embosomed in his charming family group. How proper, and how rare, that a true creator should have so beautiful, so calm a setting to work in. As we turned out of the drive into the road, the roses seemed to close in upon him with a gentle, genial familiarity, and enfold him. Such graciousness. Such peace. . . .

Chapter 2

A Trunk without a Label

Two months after his visit to the Seatons' home, Nigel Strangeways received a telegram:

> STRANGEWAYS: *Welbeck Club, London, W.1.*
> BODY IN THAMES 1½ MILES UPSTREAM FROM HINTON LACEY STOP ARE YOU INTERESTED QUESTION MARK
>
> PAUL

To which Nigel replied:

> WILLINGHAM: *Robb Farm, Hinton Lacey, Oxfordshire.*
> NO WHY SHOULD I BE FISH IT OUT IF IT WORRIES YOU VERY BUSY
>
> NIGEL

Two days later, while he was working at his monograph on the subject of graphology in relation to the manuscripts of certain twentieth-century poets, a second telegram arrived:

> STRANGEWAYS: *Welbeck Club, London, W 1*
> POLICE BESIEGING PLASH MEADOW STOP JANET SEATON IN GREAT FORM O/C THE DEFENSE STOP HAS ALREADY CLONKED INSPECTOR STOP ARE YOU INTERESTED NOW YOU OLD VULTURE QUESTION MARK
>
> PAUL

Nigel did not reply. Paul Willingham never wrote letters and refused to have a telephone in his house, on the score that he had done quite enough talking over the intercom during the war: so there was nothing for it but to go down and ask him to explain his rigmarole. But Nigel first rang up his old friend, Superintendent Blount, at New Scotland Yard: he had no intention of interrupting his work merely on the strength of a flippant telegram from Paul. At the same time, it could not be ignored that a body found in the Thames one and a half miles *up*stream from

Hinton Lacey was a body found in the Thames half a mile *down*stream from Ferry Lacey; and presumably the police would not visit Plash Meadow just to admire the roses.

"Blount? Strangeways here. Sorry to bother you, but do you know anything about a body found in the Thames two or three days ago—in Oxfordshire, near a place called Ferry Lacey?"

"E'eh, why, good Lord, the assistant commissioner's just been talking to me about it this forenoon. Now isn't that a vairy strange coincidence? The Oxfordshire chaps have asked for our help."

"What is it? Suicide? Murder?"

"Och, it's murder all right. Don't you ever read the newspapers?"

"Only the *News of the World.* And it's not Sunday yet. Who's the victim?"

"That's what we've got to find out," said Superintendent Blount, with a grim chuckle. "But how d'you know about it if you haven't read the papers?"

"Well, I've met the Seatons, who live—"

"The devil you have! Are you free this evening? I'd like to have a chat with you after I've seen Inspector Gates—he's the local chap in charge of the investigation."

"The one Mrs. Seaton clonked?"

"Eh, what's that? Oh yes, the lady appears to be something of a Tartar. Now, would you be free about 10P.M.? . . ."

Nigel decided not to look up the last few days' newspapers, but to wait till Blount gave him the story, ungarbled. Shortly after ten that night, the two of them were sitting in Nigel's room with a bottle of whisky between them.

"A vairy sweet dram," said Blount, smacking his lips. "Where d'you get the stuff? Are you in the black market? Well, good luck to you. Now, about this body of yours . . ."

The facts, as related by Blount, were as follows: On the previous Sunday, at 9:20 in the evening, a young couple on holiday had pushed their punt into a reed bed by the south bank of the Thames, intending to moor there for the night. Thrusting his pole down into the mud, the young man felt an obstruction. He fished with the boat hook, and pulled up the body of a man which had been caught in the reeds underwater. The girl disembarked and went for help to the nearest farm, while the man remained by the body. In due course the police arrived, and the body was taken to a mortuary. Post-mortem examination revealed no signs of asphyxia: therefore ("apart from other evidence," said Blount grimly) death had not been caused by drowning. Rigor mortis had passed off: the palms of the hands and soles of the feet presented a bleached appearance, and there was brownish discoloration of the surface veins of the body, but not yet the green hue in the abdominal region which comes as the second stage of colliquative putrefaction. These signs gave the time of death within approximate limits of from 36 hours to five days before the discovery of the corpse.

Since dead bodies do not come to the surface and float in less than eight or ten days from time of death, the victim must have been put into the river at or near the spot where he was found. Because of the weir not far upstream, there was a strongish current, which might conceivably have rolled the body some little distance along the river bed: the police might conduct experiments with a dummy to test this. But, to sum it up, everything pointed to the body having been put into the river not later than the night of Friday-Saturday, or earlier than the previous Tuesday, at some point between Ferry Lacey and the reed bed where it was found, if it was not actually placed in the reeds. No attempt had been made to weigh the body down, which was unusual in cases of this sort. Search of the river banks for traces of the corpse's disposal had been rendered almost hopeless by the trampling and debris of the members of a London angling club, who had been fishing this reach all Sunday. But the local police had found no suspicious marks on the section of bank nearest the reed bed. The possibility that the corpse had been conveyed to this point by boat, and dumped into the water, was likely enough; inquiries were being made on these lines too.

The superintendent reeled off these particulars, then stopped short and applied himself to his whisky with a somewhat leery look at Nigel.

"So how was he murdered?" Nigel asked.

"There were no marks of violence—e'eh—on the body."

"Poison?"

"No trace of poison in the organs," replied Blount, evidently enjoying Nigel's mystified expression.

"He wasn't drowned. He wasn't poisoned. He wasn't shot, stabbed, or beaten to death. What sort of a corpse is this?"

"He was wearing a mackintosh—no other clothes at all. Faint traces of bloodstains were found on it, in spite of the immersion," continued Blount with stolid complacence.

"But how the devil?—"

"Mostly on the *outside* of the mackintosh. The deceased was judged to be about five feet, eight inches in height."

"What d'you mean, 'judged to be'? Haven't the Oxfordshire police got a tape measure?"

Blount's climax, for which he'd certainly worked hard enough, now arrived. He said,

"Well, e'eh, ye'll no' judge precisely of a man's height when his head is missing."

The superintendent sat back and savored Nigel's amazement.

"Just so," he went on, after a pause. "The head had been hacked off the neck, verra clumsily; amateurish work—"

"T'ck, t'ck, t'ck."

"—and they can't find it anywhere, what's more. Inspector Gates has had the river dragged for a mile either way, and—"

"But if the body was brought by boat, the chap might have been murdered and his head disposed of hundreds of miles away."

"Aye, just so. But there was a tear in the mackintosh, and the wee piece of stuff torn from it was found on a barbed-wire hedge on the edge of Foxhole Wood, about a mile from the footbridge at Ferry Lacey."

"Well, what's your trouble, then? The chap must have been a local. Who's missing in the neighborhood?"

"Nobody's missing," replied Blount. "And what's more, my boy, we've had men working through the list of missing males for the whole of Great Britain, and the body does not answer satisfactorily to any of the descriptions given."

"Then why was his head cut off?"

"Exactly, Strangeways! You've put your finger right on the spot," exclaimed Blount, with as near an approach to excitement as Nigel had ever seen in him. "You cut off a man's head, or batter his features, to prevent your victim being recognized. You remove his clothes so that tailor's labels and laundry marks shall not be identified—the mackintosh was a cheap one, by the way, from the Universal Tailors—could have been bought at any of several hundred branches—we're trying to trace it, but—" the superintendent shrugged. "Now why should the murderer go to all this trouble, if the victim was an absolute unknown anyway? Of course, it's early days yet. But this body seems to have turned up simply out of the blue. It just doesn't correspond with any of the descriptions of missing persons. I tell you, it's no' canny. Well now, what do *you* make of it?"

"Perhaps he did. Turn up out of the blue, I mean," said Nigel meditatively. "From a far country. Was he wearing leather boots?"

"Leather boots? I've just told you that, except for a mackintosh—"

"Yes, of course," murmured Nigel. "But—" he began to quote:

O suitably-attired-in-leather-boots
Head of a traveler, wherefore, seeking whom,
Whence, by what way, how purposed art thou come
To this well-nightingaled vicinity?

"What is all this tommyrot?"

"First lines of Housman's parody of a Greek tragedy. Very apt. Asks all the questions we've got to answer. Ferry Lacey's a quiet, peaceful place; a dead end. You wouldn't go there on your way to anywhere else. Small population—five hundred perhaps. If a stranger turned up there, he'd stand out like a black sheep on a snowfield. The whole village would be talking about him."

"We've had no reports of any stranger being seen in the village last week."

"Which implies that he didn't *want* to be seen. Arrived at night, perhaps. And why was he walking through that wood where he got caught up by the barbed wire? Perhaps because he had a rendezvous there: perhaps because he wished to avoid the roads. Both explanations involve secrecy. You know, Blount, there's one class of missing persons your lists won't altogether cover. Deserters from H.M. Forces. Add in returned prisoners, displaced persons, all the flotsam and jetsam of war."

"Is that all?" said Blount dryly.

"A little tactful gossiping in the neighborhood should discover whether there are any families with dubious relatives—any skeletons in cupboards or black sheep or prodigal sons. How old was this corpse of yours?"

"Fifty-five to sixty, the doctors reckon."

"Not a deserter, then. But—"

"Rather ill-nourished. But tough and sinewy for his age; had done hard manual work recently: also been living some time in the East—pigmentation of the skin." Blount went on, poker faced.

Nigel threw up his hands. "As you know all about him, why come to me?"

"Just to admire the trained theoretic mind exercising itself on inductive thought. Aye, 'head of a *traveler,*' verra good, Strangeways, verra good," said Blount, slapping his own bald head enthusiastically. "But let's have some more induction."

"Well, then, clothing of corpse. Mackintosh left on because label of British outfitters would give nothing away. Rest of clothes removed because they bore signs, in their cut or material or on the labels, what foreign parts our traveler had come from, and might lead to the discovering of his identity."

"Just so. We're making inquiries at the ports and the shipping and airway offices of course, but it'll be a terrible long tedious affair. Anything else?"

"I find this mackintosh business rather odd, don't you?" said Nigel slowly. "Why bother to put it on again after removing the rest of his clothes? Was it *his* blood on the mackintosh?"

"Same blood group, anyway."

"But mostly on the outside. You'd think that, if he'd been battered to death, or had his throat cut, a lot of blood would have trickled down *inside* the mac."

"Uh-huh."

"Which suggests it may not have been his mac at all. It may have belonged to the murderer, who put it on to keep the victim's blood off his own clothes."

"Aye, that's possible. But it still doesn't account for his putting the mac on the body afterward. Much safer for him to burn it, or hide it, together with the victim's clothes. Not that it's ever safe to try to hide or burn articles of clothing. Remember the Lakey case in New Zealand?"

Nigel had opened a drawer of his bureau. He took out a large-scale ordnance map and opened it on the table before them.

"Here's Ferry Lacey. Let's see, now. There are three railway stations within about five miles of the village. Redcote and Chillingham Junction on the main G.W.R. line, Hinton Lacey on a small branch line. But Redcote's the wrong side of the river—the opposite side from this wood you say he came through. That leaves Chillingham and Hinton Lacey. But a chap wishing to avoid notice would never get out at a small branch-line station. So my bet is Chillingham Junction. Quite a busy place. Station on outskirts of town. He could take this road, walk four miles, then strike off the road, into Foxhole Wood, and it's a short cut to Ferry Lacey. He must have known this part of the country pretty well, to know about the short cut."

"Just so," said Blount. "But the only evidence we have, so far, that he came through the wood is that wee bit of mackintosh on the barbed wire. And you've just suggested it may not have been his mackintosh at all."

"Oh hell! Tripping me up on my own words! You solve it, then. It's all yours, this muddy mystery."

"I'll look after the routine investigation. But, e'eh, you wouldn't be thinking of taking a holiday in Oxfordshire yourself, would you?"

"Certainly not. I'm busy."

"Because you have friends there, and you'd pick up a lot more gossip than flatfoots like Gates and myself."

"Oh, talking of Gates," said Nigel, "what's this about him getting into a free fight with Mrs. Seaton?"

Blount looked shocked. "Oh, well now, that's a fearful exaggeration. Gates was merely inquiring, in the way of his duty, whether any members of the household had seen a stranger about during the last week. And it seems they have a wee dwarf creature as a servant—"

"Yes. Finny Black."

"—and Mrs. Seaton refused to allow Gates to question him; said he was dumb, or half-witted, or something. Gates persisted. And she slapped his face. Gates is new to the district, mind you: and maybe he was a thought tactless. But—"

"Huh. The Gestapo hanging together."

"—but it's a serious thing, assaulting a police officer in the execution of his duty. Oh dear me no, won't do at all. Then the lady threatened to bring the chief constable and the lord lieutenant and the whole boiling down on puir wee Gates' head. It seems she has a great deal of influence in the county. So Gates thought he'd better say no more about it."

Blount drained the last of his whisky and reached for his battered felt hat. "Will I be seeing you in the country?"

"Well, I could stay with Paul Willingham: and I'd like to get some samples of Robert Seaton's manuscripts for a monograph I'm writing. So perhaps—"

"That's the boy! I knew you'd not keep your long nose out of the business—"

The door closed on Blount's stocky figure before Nigel could find the apt reply. . . .

"I thought you'd not keep your long nose out of—"

"The next person who refers to my nose, in whatever terms, will be felled to the ground," said Nigel. It was the evening after his conversation with Blount: he and Paul were sitting in the bar of the Lacey Arms at Hinton Lacey. "And do try to use your loaf. I shan't hear anything if the locals find I'm connected with the police," Nigel continued in a low voice.

"I shall say you're a man from the B.B.C. It always impresses my neighbors. God knows why. I shall say you're the producer of one of those corny programs—you know—Here's Wishing You A Jolly Good Bung-Ho—you know the sort of twaddle. And you've come here to put them all on the air. They'll eat it. Evening, Fred! . . . Tom! This is a friend of mine, Mr. Strangeways. He comes from the B.B.C. and he's going to—"

"I don't come from the B.B.C. And I'm *not* going to buy you a drink, Paul. If you gentlemen would care—"

"Thanking *you,* sir," said Tom and Fred in rapid unison.

"The B.B.C.," began Tom presently. "That's a remarkable organization, look at it what way you will. Mind you, I don't hold with that 'ere Light Program. All bloody yup, to my way of thinking. But these symphonies—classical music, like—I'm partial to them myself. Sir Boult, now, there's a fine conductor for you." Tom wiped off the ends of his ragged mustache. "You're not by any chance associated with the Light Program, sir, I hope, for I'd not wish to give offense."

"No. No connection at all," said Nigel, darting a poisoned glance at Paul. "In fact, I've nothing to do with the—"

"Perhaps the gentleman is on the engineering side," suggested Fred. " 'Tis all a mystery to I—these high frequencies and kilowatts and meggiecycles and such. But I suppose they'm an open book to you, sir. Come to think of it, my missus says to me, just as I was stepping out to come along to the Arms, 'Fred,' she says, 'this effing wireless of yourn have pegged out again, and I was set to listen to that nice Dickens serial while you was at the boozer,' she says. So to make a long story short, when Mr. Willingham mentions how you're a gentleman from the B.B.C., sir, I says to myself—"

"But"—began Nigel.

"—I says to myself, why Fred, I says, perhaps the gentleman could spare the time to step along to my humble abode, tomorrow morning, say, and have a look at my old wireless. Put it to rights in two shakes of a cat's arse, you would, I'll take my oath. Not that I wants to put you to no trouble, sir."

"But—"

"You just think it over, sir. Please yourself. Your very good health."

When the two old farm laborers had edged back to the bar, Nigel turned on Paul.

"I'll murder you if you involve me with any more of the local highbrows. How the devil d'you suppose I—"

"Keep weaving, old boy. You did fine. It's all in the build-up. Now we'll try Jack Whitford. Jack!"

A stalwart, tousle-headed man—he had just come in with a lurcher, which had instantly curled itself up under one of the benches—strolled over. Paul introduced them.

Nigel said: "In case Mr. Willingham tells you I'm from the B.B.C., it's a lie."

"Ah. Terrible bloody liar Mr. Willingham is," said Jack, beaming amiably. "Seen you talking to those two old fools. You going to put them on the air, mister? Couple of quaint old country bumpkins nattering about how they used to mow the fifty-acre by hand in their young days? It turns me up, some of the stuff the B.-bloody-C. puts out about us country folk."

Nigel gave it up. "I'm not interested in that sort of thing," he said. "But this murder of yours—that'd make a good feature program. The effect of a murder upon the neighborhood, I mean."

He was aware that silence had descended upon the bar-room of the Lacey Arms. Jack Whitford was gazing at him enigmatically out of those pale blue eyes, which had the sailor's steady, distant focus.

" 'Tidn't no murder of ours," he said. " 'Tis they Ferry Lacey chaps. Proper wild lot of bastards they are at Ferry Lacey. We're law-abiding folk at Hinton."

Paul Willingham laughed. "Especially at night."

"What the eye don't see, the heart don't grieve for," said Jack.

Nigel said, after a pause, "I know a chap, down in Devonshire where I used to live—he was a Somerset chap, actually—he used to take a long pole into the woods and fasten some sort of firework made of sulphur to one end, and light it, and poke it up among the branches. And the fumes stupefied the roosting pheasants. They just fell off their perches into his hands, like ripe apples."

Jack Whitford slapped his thigh. "That's a good 'un! Never heard of that before. Stupefied the s.o.b's! Well, I'll be damned!"

The ice was broken. Presently Nigel asked the poacher if Foxhole Wood was preserved. Jack Whitford gave him a wary glance.

"Mr. Strangeways is all right," put in Paul.

"Ah. It is. *And* wired up. Now. But you can get in, and out, if you knows yer way," Jack replied, with his quick, ferocious smile.

Nigel pumped him again, cautiously. The wood, it seemed, had once been part of the Lacey property. James Seaton, father of the poet, had sold it to a London syndicate. The syndicate had installed a gamekeeper, and in general made things difficult for local enterprise. They had even, after a bit, wired up the gate of an immemorial right-of-way through the wood.

"How long ago was that?" asked Nigel.

"Matter of eight or nine years. Old Mr. Lacey now—the squire as used to be—he'd never have allowed them London bastards to get away with *that.*"

"I wonder Mr. Seaton doesn't do something about it," said Paul.

"Oh, reckon he's all for a quiet life. We know who wears the trousers over to Laceys these days."

A contemplative silence fell. Presently Jack Whitford raised his face from his beer mug.

"I could have told that lug of an inspector something."

"He was on at you too, was he?" said Paul.

"Ah. That's a nosy-parker. I sent him about his business. Not even a local man. 'You stick your nose in where it belongs,' I says to him, straight."

Jack took another swig of beer.

"Can't be too careful with that sort. 'Had I seen any strangers about, any night last week?' 'And me tucked up in bed with my missus?' I says; 'don't be daft, I don't go out looking for trouble, like some. How should I be seeing strangers?' "

"I suppose he was after the man who murdered the chap found in the river," said Nigel innocently.

"You never knows what the coppers are after. Don't bloody know, themselves, half the time." Jack paused. "Funny you should mention Foxhole Wood. I saw a chap there last week—last Thursday night, it'd be." He lowered his voice confidentially. "Thought it was Mr. Seaton at first. Wouldn't have been the first time I'd seen him at night. Passed as near to me as you are, he has, many a time: composing his poems, I reckon. Ah, he'm another of us night birds."

"Perhaps it *was* Mr. Seaton you saw."

"Well, he had a look of him, first glance. But he passes by, very quick, where I'm standing behind a tree. And Mr. Seaton always walks slow, see? And then this s.o.b. turns off the ride, down the old right of way. And I hear him presently climbing over the gate—the one I told you about, with barbed wire all over it. So I knew it couldn't be Mr. Seaton. He'd never use that gate."

"Did you notice how this chap was dressed?"

"Had a mac on. Couldn't see nothing else. He flitted past me like a shadow. Reckon he needed it, too."

"How d'you mean?"

"Hell of a thundershower we had, that night."

"You know," said Paul, "this body they found in the river—it had a mackintosh on."

Jack Whitford gave him a bland, crafty look. "Plenty of mackintoshes about in these parts, Mr. Willingham."

"What time was it when you saw this stranger in the wood?"

"Not long before midnight."

"Funny if it turned out to be the bloke who got murdered," said Paul. "Well, drink up, Jack, and we'll make a four-hand." . . .

When the game was over, and Paul and Nigel were preparing to leave, Jack Whitford leaned over to Nigel.

"You'll not put down anything I said just now in one of your radio programs, will you, mister?"—a sharp, foxy grin. "I've got a reputation to lose, see?"

Nigel reassured him. "It's a queer thing, though," he added, "a stranger walking through a wood in the middle of the night. You'd think he'd stick to the roads."

"You've said it. And I'll tell you something more. You've not been in Foxhole Wood yourself?"

"No."

"Well, just you try walking through it at night. Proper bleeding rabbit warren of paths it is, half of 'em overgrown too. You'd lose your way, I'll lay you a dollar."

"And this chap was walking fast ahead, as if—"

"Ah, as if he knew it blindfold."

"And yet he took the path that had been wired up?"

"Ah. Bit of a riddle, ain't it? Well, cheer-oh, I'll be seeing you."

As the two friends strolled up the village street, Paul said, "Interesting evening? I think I handled it pretty well for you."

"You damn' near wrecked the whole thing with that farcical B.B.C. stuff. I could have wrung your neck."

"Pish. Establishing an identity for you. Most important in a place like this."

"I like that poacher of yours. He's no fool."

"It *was* the murdered man he saw, I suppose?"

"Or the murderer. But what's really interesting is the riddle he set me. And I think I've guessed the answer."

Chapter 3

Dead End

After breakfast the next morning, Nigel set out to walk to Ferry Lacey by a detour through Foxhole Wood. On his way he telephoned to Robert Seaton from the public call box in Hinton Lacey and received a warm invitation to lunch. He then took the road toward Chillingham. A couple of miles along this, he came to the outskirts of Foxhole Wood, on the right of the road. If the unknown traveler, whom Jack Whitford had seen in the wood just before midnight the previous Thursday, had walked from Chillingham Junction to this point, it would have taken him the best part of an hour, for the Junction was four miles away. Both the route and the time he had chosen suggested a wish for secrecy. Therefore it was unlikely that he would hang about at the station after getting out of his train. Therefore his train had probably arrived there somewhere about 11 P.M. Nigel made a mental note to find out from the stationmaster what trains stopped at the Junction around this time, and where they came from.

It was possible, of course, that the unknown had not traveled by rail at all: he might have taken a bus, or hitch-hiked, or even hired a car. Or again, he might have come to Chillingham by train and got a lift from there to Foxhole Wood. But there were doubtful possibilities, for each of them would involve a greater risk of the recognition he seemed to have feared: sooner or later, if there were to be a hue and cry after him, someone would come forward who remembered giving a lift to a man of his description. But a crowded train, particularly a long-distance express, would be a pretty safe method of travel: and expresses from both Bristol and the South Wales ports passed through Chillingham on their way to London.

Nigel took out his large-scale map, set his stop watch going, and turned into the wood, just where a notice warned Trespassers, in exceptionally stringent terms, that they would be Prosecuted. The bridle path along which he walked was fairly well defined: his map told him that it was a right-of-way—no doubt the one the London syndicate had closed. But, as Jack Whitford had said, the wood was a warren of paths. At night, unless one knew the path well, it would be almost impossible not to stray down one of the tracks, hardly less narrow than the right-of-way itself, which led off from it.

The morning was bright, and fresh for August. The leaves made a lace of light and shadow. Presently Nigel came to a broad ride, furrowed by the wheels of tractor and trailer which had been at work on thinning out the wood. This ride, according to his map, bisected the wood on a diagonal, and the right-of-way ran down it for several hundred yards to the right, then branched off to the left again, its opening half-overgrown with brushwood. It was here that Jack Whitford had seen the stranger making for the edge of the wood. At night, no one unfamiliar with the wood could have found so readily the point where the right-of-way branched off from the main ride.

Nigel followed it for a quarter of a mile. Then the trees thinned away and he was confronted with a high, narrow gate, positively swathed in rusting barbed wire. There were footprints and crushed undergrowth all around, traces of the police search. Nigel struck off the path, emerged from the wood further to the right, and stood blinking in the sunshine, which showed him a vestigial path running across a meadow toward Ferry Lacey, and the glittering ringlets of the Thames. The path led him into the Seatons' pastureland, where it forked, one branch going right handed to the village itself, the other toward the iron gate in the walled orchard of Plash Meadow. Nigel noticed that this gate was locked, and the key not there, but the wards and hinges were oiled. He glanced at his stop watch: it had taken him twenty-one minutes to walk from the far side of Foxhole Wood to this point; say one and a half hours, by night, from Chillingham Junction to Ferry Lacey—not more, perhaps ten to fifteen minutes less if the traveler had walked fast the whole way.

Nigel now turned back from the gate and strolled down to the river. He scrutinized for a few moments the short shingly incline which dropped away below the bank into deep water—the bathing pool Robert Seaton had shown him during his previous visit. One could easily launch a boat from here, he said to himself. Or a corpse. Only the corpse was found half a mile downstream. And Paul had told him that there were no boathouses on the stretch of river immediately below the Ferry Lacey footbridge.

"Not my job, anyway," he muttered.

It was at this moment that, looking up, he saw, just round the corner of a clump of reeds to his left, a head resting upon the silver Thames, as it might be John the Baptist's on the platter—dank, drowned, black hair falling about the dead-white face, whose eyes were fixed upon his. For a second or two he gaped at it, stupefied and unrecognizing. Then the mouth of the head opened. A cool voice said,

"Why don't you come in? You look hot. Been chasing someone?"

It was Mara Torrance. Nigel's heart resumed its normal beat.

"No. You come out. And do stop staring at me like John the Baptist. You gave me quite a turn," he added irritably.

The young woman emerged, dripping. She unloosed the shoulder straps of her scarlet bathing dress and lay down on the bank beside him.

"I thought you'd be turning up soon," she said. *"And* with heads on your brain. I presume they haven't found it yet, or you wouldn't have been so startled by mine."

"The police? As far as I know, they haven't."

"Did I really look like a corpse—from the neck upward, I mean? It's not very flattering of you," Miss Torrance pursued.

"You don't now."

"What *do* I look like then, Nigel Strangeways?" Her eyes, shaded with one hand from the sun, stared insolently into his.

"Oh, you look very nice. And you also look like a girl who has a good deal of sleep to make up," said Nigel, looking down at the magnolia-white face, the skin puffy about the eyes.

"I don't sleep well without a man in my bed. And that's not so easily arranged in these parts."

Nigel laughed unaffectedly. "Good gracious! Are you trying to shock me? With simple physiological facts?" The girl's right hand, which had turned palm upward on the grass and slid toward him, clenched itself. "You ought to get married, then."

"So Lionel tells me. But it's no good. . . . I'm not . . . I can't . . ." Her voice faltered. She tried again. "He's too much under his stepmother's thumb for me. Could you fancy Janet as a mother-in-law?"

"Lionel?" said Nigel, surprised. "I should have thought, if anyone was under her thumb, it's Robert Seaton."

"Oh, Robert can afford to be under her thumb: or to seem to be."

Nigel glanced at the girl sharply. It was the first perceptive unegotistic remark she had made.

"You admire him very much?" he asked.

"Robert? I—I venerate him. He's the only really good man I've ever met. He was wonderful to me, when I was—when something foul happened. A long time ago. But that's not important. He's a great poet."

"Yes . . . Well, to revert to your insomnia for a moment. What about last week? Did you sleep badly every night? Friday night, for instance?"

Nigel was aware of a quick tension, and relaxing of it, in the girl beside him.

"Oh, Friday? No, we all slept like logs that night, I should imagine."

"Why was that?"

"Because we'd had such a hellish time the night before."

"Oh?" said Nigel, gazing noncommittally down his nose.

"Yes. There was a cracking thunderstorm. Not long after midnight. It went on and on. Went away and came back again. I hate thunder and adore lightning. I watched the storm out of my bedroom window."

"Which way does it face?"

"Over the courtyard."

"You didn't see any mysterious strangers gliding along—with or without heads—I take it?"

"No. The police have asked me all this, anyway. It's a frightful bore."

"And the rest of the family had a bad night too?"

"Well, Robert and Janet did, certainly. I saw them crossing the courtyard, soon after half-past twelve—the first drops of the thundershower were just beginning to fall. And Vanessa apparently saw them there again, half an hour later, when the second thunderstorm was in progress."

"What on earth were they doing?"

"I asked Janet the next morning. She said she'd got worried about Kitty—that's the mare—being frightened by the storm, and maybe kicking her loose box to bits. So she went out with Robert to see."

"And the second time? When Vanessa saw them?"

"Oh, Janet said she must have been dreaming. Vanessa stuck to it that she had seen them, in a flash of sheet lightning, just under the big chestnut tree."

"What? Sheltering under it?"

"No, hurrying past it, away from the house. I expect Vanessa *was* dreaming. But Janet needn't have been so brusque with her. As a matter of fact, she was very queer and edgy all Friday, took to her bed before dinner."

"Janet?"

"Uh-huh."

"And what about the others? Lionel, for instance?"

"Oh, Lionel claims to have slept through the whole thing. Says the war taught him to sleep through any bombardment." Mara added, rather pettishly, "He has to have his eight hours of sleep every night. Very regular habits, our Lionel."

"And your father? Did the storm keep him awake?"

The young woman paused before answering. "I shouldn't think so. He —well, he was a bit plastered that evening. Why are you asking me all this, anyway?"

"Thursday night may turn out to be rather important."

"But it was Friday night you began asking me about."

"A slip of the tongue," replied Nigel blandly.

" 'Slip of the tongue!' You liar! You've just been leading me on. It's contemptible!" She was sitting bolt upright now, positively glaring at him.

"Now you mustn't get worked up. The police will soon be asking you all a lot of questions about Thursday night. You've just had a dress rehearsal with me. That's all there is to it. And you've told me nothing that could possibly incriminate anyone, as far as I can see. After all, there's no evidence that the murdered man came to Plash Meadow. Yet."

"I think you're rather a frightening man, Nigel Strangeways," she said, looking at him doubtfully.

"And I think you're not nearly as wicked a woman as you try to make out."

She seized his hand, drove her nails viciously into it and threw it away from her.

"Don't be paternal to me!" she exclaimed furiously. "Don't you dare to be—" She ran away from him, into the river, and swam strongly out on her back. It occurred to Nigel that a strong swimmer could have towed the corpse some way downstream, then let it go. He stood up.

"Won't you walk along to the house with me?" he called.

"No, I'll have to creep in by the back way. Janet doesn't like me showing off my figure in full view of the front windows. She's a great one for the proprieties. Why don't you come along to our barn after lunch? See you then."

Nigel waved and set off along the bank. He went through a gate into the lane that led up to the village from the footbridge, climbed its steep slope for a hundred yards or so, then he was in front of Plash Meadow.

The house looked different. It seemed less enchanted, more awake than when he had last seen it. The roses—that was it: most of them had withered, and there was a tarnished look on the few that were left. It was a beautiful house, oh yes; but only a house now, not a brilliant, enervating dream any more. What on earth am I doing here? Nigel mused. What sort of a trap am I walking into? And why should the idea of a trap come into my head at all? A great poet, his well-born and distinguished wife, his son, his daughter—what could be more reassuring? Just because a headless body is found half a mile away from their house, I come here with a mind already half-poisoned, looking for the sinister detail in every hole and corner, in every artless word. A girl plunges into a river, and I have to think of a corpse being towed out from the bank.

Nigel pulled himself up, realizing that the house was beginning to cast its spell on him again, roses or no roses, and more swiftly this time. No, there *are* certain queer anomalies, he said to himself. As, for instance, why should Janet Seaton, that race-proud woman and stickler for the proprieties, allow a raffish couple like the Torrances to live in her barn? And how did Mara Torrance, who so venerates Robert Seaton, come to do that wood carving in which he so discreditably figured? And why had Robert called it "autotherapy"? And when was it—

"Hello! You look awfully worried. Have you come about our murder?"

Vanessa Seaton's head, in its tawny cloud of hair, had risen up from the other side of the low garden wall, a foot away from his own face. Nigel gave a dramatic start.

"Heavens! You frightened me out of my wits. Where did you spring from?"

"I've been tracking you. Our Lieutenant—" she blushed rosily "—in the Guides, you know—Lieutenant taught me tracking last term. She's wizard at it. The great thing is to sink into the landscape, freeze quite still if anyone looks in your direction. Then you're practically invisible."

"Hmm," said Nigel, eyeing Vanessa's plump contours in a marked manner. "And did you trail the police too, when they were here?"

"You bet I did. There were hordes of them. Well, three at least. All over the garden and orchard. Peering at the ground." Her voice sank to a hoarse and bloodcurdling whisper. "Do you know what they were looking for? *Freshly turned earth!* That's what Lionel says. A new policeman came this morning. His name is Superintendent Blount. He's just down the road now, talking to Hubert."

"Hubert?"

"Our gardener."

"I must have a word with him. Like to come?"

Vanessa drew back, took a run at the wall, vaulted it and fell in a heap on the other side. "I don't seem to have got the knack of landing yet. Lieutenant can do it absolutely pro style. But she's our gym mistress too, of course."

She walked up the lane beside him, chattering hard. They passed a row of cottages on their right. Beyond this row there was a path, meeting the lane at right angles. Vanessa led the way down it. At the far end Nigel saw a stile and the path continued over the meadows beyond: he recognized it as the other fork of the right-of-way. If the unknown had not taken the left-hand one, leading to the orchard gate of Plash Meadow, he must presumably have come down this way into the village.

"That's Hubert's cottage," said Vanessa, pointing through a gate in the hedge to their left.

"Will you go in, and if the superintendent is still there, tell him Mr. Strangeways would like a word with him."

"I say, d'you *know* the superintendent? Could you get his autograph for me? I simply didn't dare ask him for it."

"I expect so."

When Blount emerged from the cottage, towed by Vanessa, Nigel said,

"Good morning, Superintendent. I've told Miss Seaton you'll give her your autograph."

"Oh well, now, oh well now," said Blount, patting his bald head.

"So run back to the house and get your album, Vanessa."

The girl galloped off. Nigel quickly told Blount the information he had received from Jack Whitford, adjuring him not to make any trouble with the poacher for having withheld it from Inspector Gates: there might be more information to come from that quarter.

"Aye. It gives us a line. I'm much obliged to you, Strangeways. We'll take it up at the Chillingham end, too. The Thursday night. In Foxhole Wood, shortly before midnight, this chap was seen, eh?"

"And it takes about quarter of an hour's brisk walking from the wired gate to Ferry Lacey. You know about the right-of-way, I presume, and how it forks."

"Uh-huh. Any more gossip?"

"Plenty. It'll keep for a bit. Can you come along to Paul Willingham's farm, at Hinton Lacey—say nine o'clock this evening? We'll have a chat."

"Very well. By the bye, your deserter theory won't do. Gates got in touch with the Service authorities. As far as we can tell, no lads from this village are on their list of deserters."

"Oh, that's cold rice now. What you've got to find is somebody who knew this part of the country very well, but left it for good nine or ten years ago."

Blount raised his eyebrows interrogatively. A tremor of the earth's surface announced the return, at full speed, of Miss Vanessa Seaton.

"I'll explain this evening," said Nigel hurriedly. "Now, out with your pen and sign, please."

As they walked back to Plash Meadow, Vanessa told Nigel that her stepmother would like to see him privately before lunch. She took him to a small sitting room, where they found Mrs. Seaton doing her accounts. She rose and received him graciously.

"Do sit down, won't you? All right, Vanessa, run along now. . . . Mr. Strangeways, I wanted a word with you. Vanessa tells me this Superintendent Blount is a friend of yours. Perhaps you could advise me. You see, he has asked if I—if we have any objection to the police searching this house. Naturally, I asked him if he had a search warrant. He hadn't of course. And I must say it seems to me quite preposterous—I mean, it was bad enough having that fool of an Inspector Gates badgering us all. And I gave the police a free hand to search the grounds and outbuildings, several days ago. But the house! Well, really!"

"Blount cannot very well proceed without a warrant. But it's everyone's duty to assist the police to the best of—"

"I consider it my Prime Duty, Mr. Strangeways, to protect my Husband from worry and interference," said Janet Seaton grandly. "His Work must always come first with me. I think it quite monstrous that, because some unfortunate person gets killed—nowhere near my house, incidentally—Robert should be pestered. And just when his new Poem has reached a point that demands the greatest concentration."

"Yes. I see that. But I'm sure the search could be managed so that your husband wasn't disturbed."

"It's not only that. It's the indignity of it all—a pack of policemen ransacking one's home! I have some very valuable things here, as you know. Irreplaceable things. If they were damaged—"

"I don't think there's any likelihood of that. Scotland Yard men are extremely skilled and careful."

"But I *can't* see the necessity for it."

"It's just to make sure that this man who was murdered didn't come here. He might have been a burglar and tried to break in, for instance. Or a fugitive from justice."

"But, good gracious me, if he'd broken in, if he'd left clues here, *we* should have found them."

"On Friday morning, you mean?"

"Yes. If that was the morning after—after it happened. I didn't know the police had fixed it so definitely."

Nigel seemed to detect a certain unwonted flurry in Mrs. Seaton's rhythm at this point—a check, a recovery, a rush in her words, like the gait of a hurdler who has just touched the top bar with his foot, but recovered himself well enough to make up the lost ground. She went on,

"I'll think over what you say. Well, we mustn't keep the Poet waiting any longer. He's expecting you."

It's either pure innocence or a phenomenal effort of will power, thought Nigel as they went upstairs, that she should refrain from sounding me further about the Thursday night.

Robert Seaton was sitting at a small table in the far corner of his study. The window overlooked the courtyard, the outbuildings, and the rolling pastoral country beyond: but the table was set so that his back was turned to the window when writing. There were bookshelves lining three of the walls. On one of them stood a bronze bust of the Poet, by Epstein. The room was light, fresh and tidy looking: but somewhat austere, compared with the elaborate richness and artistry of the downstairs rooms; no pictures, no valuable bric-a-brac.

"I've got 'em all for you," said Robert Seaton cheerfully. "You must thank my wife for that. No idea they hadn't been thrown away. But she'd kept 'em all under lock and key."

He pointed to a pile of five or six small notebooks on the table.

"Robert is too modest," said Mrs. Seaton. "I knew they would be of interest to posterity."

"Posterity? Poof! That's a very big word. I'm sure Strangeways doesn't want to be called posterity."

"You know what I mean, Robert." Mrs. Seaton sounded rather piqued. Nigel seemed to sense a change in Robert Seaton. He was brisker, more alive than in June, as though something had been released in him. The air after a thunderstorm, thought Nigel: damn it, I've got thunder on the brain!

"Now here," the poet was saying. "What's this? Oh yes, *Lyrical Interludes.*" He had taken up the top notebook from the pile. "Mmm. I had nothing to say in those days, but I said it rather well. You'll find it quite easy to follow. I've always done my first drafts in pencil—afraid they're almost illegible—" Looking over his shoulder, Nigel saw the page scored all over with corrections and alternatives. Robert Seaton turned over. "Then the subsequent drafts of each poem are in ink. You'll see how they worked out. Quite simple. Well, here you are, then."

He laid the pile of notebooks in Nigel's hands.

"Oh, Robert, do you think you'd better?—I mean, I'm sure Mr. Strangeways will be very careful of them. But—"

"Nonsense, my dear! If he's to work on them, he must take them along."

"I was just thinking, wouldn't it be simpler if he stayed with us at Plash Meadow while—we should be delighted to have you, Mr. Strangeways, if Paul could spare you for a few days."

"Excellent idea," said Robert Seaton, rubbing his hands briskly. "Why not? Of course you will, my dear fellow." An impish gleam came into his eyes. "You'll be able to divide your time between your work and your hobby. You've heard about our local crime, I suppose?"

"I have indeed."

"Splendid! Capital! That's fixed, then. When can you come? Tomorrow? The sooner, the better. Take some of the garrison duty off Janet's shoulders."

"Robert! Really! I'm sure Mr. Strangeways doesn't—"

"My wife has the most exaggerated ideas about the sacrosanctity of my work. I really believe she'd allow the police into this room only over her dead body."

"Mrs. Seaton was telling me you've reached a critical point in your new long poem."

"Long poem? Oh yes. To be sure. I—"

"Robert doesn't like talking about a poem he's actually at work on," Janet put in firmly.

"No. I quite understand," said Nigel.

"Well, I'm moving ahead, anyway. Janet gave me this pen a few weeks ago. Called a Biro. Ever seen one? It must have brought me luck. Scribble, scribble, scribble. But I suppose even it will dry up one day."

"You can get it refilled at Axters. Shall we go down to lunch?"

At lunch, Nigel brought the conversation round to the great thunderstorm of last week. He was aware at once of tactful efforts by Mrs. Seaton to change the subject; but Vanessa, with an air of unassuaged grievance, persisted that she had *not* been dreaming.

"I saw you both crossing the court," she said to her parents. *"Honestly* I did. And it was after the thundershower, because the grass was gleaming wet. I looked at my watch and it said five to one. I couldn't have dreamed about looking at my watch. It'd have changed into a turnip or ice cream or something, if I'd been dreaming."

"Vanessa, we've been into all this." Mrs. Seaton turned to Nigel. "We all had a very disturbed night. I went out soon after the first thunderstorm began, to see if Kitty—that's the mare—was frightened: she's very timid. Vanessa must have seen us then, and got it mixed up with a dream."

"But I tell you it *wasn't* then! I—"

"You mustn't contradict your mother," said Robert Seaton gently. "Anyway, what does it matter?"

"My veracity is being impugnated," Vanessa exclaimed, with a virgin-and-martyr air which made Lionel Seaton chuckle.

"Impugned, Fatty. Impugned," he said. "Either impugned or impregnated. You can't have it both ways."

"I shall say 'impugnated' if I wish," returned his sister, with great dignity. "It's a perfectly good word. And don't call me 'Fatty'! You should have more respect for womanhood."

The rest of lunch conducted itself quite amiably, with a great deal of family jokes and jargon bandied about. Finny Black, chuckling and gurgling at the sallies of laughter from the two young people, waited upon them deftly. Nigel thought to himself that the Seaton menage was taking its local crime very much in its stride.

As it turned out, however, he was not quite right about this. After lunch, when Lionel and Vanessa had gone off together, Mrs. Seaton took up the subject of Vanessa's "dream" again.

"We thought it best to tell her she'd imagined it all. But the fact is, she did see Robert and myself that night. I'd better explain—" she glanced at her husband "—since Mr. Strangeways has hinted that the Thursday night may be important."

She went on to say that Finny Black was apt to be overexcited by thunderstorms. It had happened several times before: he'd been found wandering about the house or grounds in a rather demented state ("like a child—an oversensitive child"). They had gone to his bedroom, to make sure he was all right. The room was empty. So they went out of doors, and looked about the grounds for him, calling his name softly so as not to alarm him further.

"And did you in fact find him?" Nigel interposed.

"Not then. He turned up about an hour later, drenched to the skin," said Robert.

Mrs. Seaton, lowering her voice confidentially, said, "You see, Vanessa is highstrung. And she's never quite taken to Finny. That's why we took the line we did. It would have been most unwise to let her know that Finny may sometimes be wandering about the place, in the dark."

Nigel thought privately that it was still more unwise not to have warned Vanessa about the possibility of a demented and gibbering dwarf bumping into her room one night. However, it was not his concern. He meditated for a moment asking them why they kept Finny Black on, if Vanessa didn't like him. But what he finally said was,

"Yes, I see. That explains it. Tell me, Mrs. Seaton, you and your people have been associated so long with this village, I expect you know the history of every family in it: tell me, do you remember anyone leaving the village, perhaps under a cloud, nine or ten years ago? A man of forty-five to fifty? One who had lived here all his life till then, or at any rate was thoroughly familiar with the surrounding countryside."

As he amplified his question, Nigel was quite horrified by its effect upon his host and hostess. Janet Seaton's sallow face darkened with a painful flush, and her big-knuckled hands clenched on the arms of her chair. Robert Seaton took his pipe out of his mouth, positively gaping at Nigel.

There was a stricken, dead silence when he stopped. Then both of them began to speak together, and both broke off.

"Really, it's too extraordinary," said the Poet, at a second attempt. "Isn't it, Janet? I mean, your whole description fits perfectly, Strangeways. But—"

"Fits whom?"

"My elder brother, Oswald."

"Robert, I don't think Mr. Strangeways is—"

"But it *does,*" said the Poet, brushing aside his wife's protest with an impatient gesture. "It was ten years ago. And he was—let me see—fifty, no forty-nine then. And he certainly knew this countryside like the back of his hand."

"But he didn't leave under a cloud, I'm sure," said Nigel. "Did he go abroad? Where is he now?"

"Oh no," said Robert Seaton. "He didn't go abroad. He disappeared one day. And—well, the next day I heard that he'd drowned himself, poor chap."

Chapter 4

The Dark Backward

Before they parted, it was arranged that Nigel should install himself at Plash Meadow on Monday. That would give him one more full day with Paul. As he strolled across the courtyard to the old tithe barn, he was thinking how satisfactorily things had panned out: he would be able to devote next week to a study of Robert Seaton's manuscripts, undistracted by misgivings about the Ferry Lacey crime; for, after what the poet had just told him, and particularly the *way* he had told it, Nigel could not seriously imagine that he had accepted the hospitality of a murderer. It was a pity, of course, that Oswald Seaton had drowned himself ten years before. Theoretically, he would have fitted into the picture very neatly—family black sheep returning, embarrassment all round, blackmail perhaps, off with his head. He could imagine Janet Seaton going to almost any lengths to preserve her status quo. But that idea didn't have to be reckoned with now, thank goodness.

Nigel walked round the barn, idly noting that one door opened onto the courtyard, while there were French windows at the end facing the drive which led out into the lane, and on the far side lay a neat little enclosed garden—rose bushes, a lawn, a few apple trees. Turning back again, after a glance at this garden plot, he found Mara Torrance opening the French windows. She let him in to the studio. This was a big, high, cool apartment, occupying half the length of the building, its whitewashed walls carrying right up to the arched and timbered roof. The rest of the barn had been divided into two stories: kitchen-dining room and offices below; above, three small bedrooms and a bathroom. Access to this upper floor, which had originally been the barn loft, was by a steep stair ladder from the studio: the loft had a balustrade, and from below presented the appearance of a musician's gallery.

At Nigel's request, Mara had taken him round the place, pointing out its features in a bored, *dégagé* manner. Nigel had glanced out of her bedroom window, from which she had seen the Seatons crossing the courtyard on the night of the storm: he had noted that this bedroom was furthest from the staircase, Rennell Torrance's nearest to it, and a cell-like spare room in between.

Now they were back in the studio. While Mara went to prepare coffee, Nigel mooched around, scrutinizing the pictures hung low on the walls, the canvases stacked against them. Rennell Torrance was clearly a prolific painter. Evidence of genius was less noticeable, however. The subjects of his canvases were romantic; the treatment ambitious, slovenly, grandiose. He sets himself up to be a "visionary" painter, thought Nigel: but his visions are synthetic—pitiable attempts to inflate a respectable, small talent into the proportions of greatness. There was a monotony about the pictures; their general impression on the eye was that of a series of unfinished studies for a masterpiece not yet begun.

Nigel turned away to a side table littered with dirty glasses, painting materials, old magazines. One of these lay open at a photograph of the Seatons and Torrances grouped against the front of Plash Meadow. It had the usual society-paper's vapid caption.

> *Artistic Entente* (read Nigel). *The distinguished poet, Robert Seaton, poses* en famille *outside his beautiful old house at Ferry Lacey. Mrs. Seaton was one of the Laceys, from time immemorial lords of the manor in this part of the world. With them are the painter, Rennell Torrance, and his attractive daughter. The Torrances live in an old tithe barn adjoining Plash Meadow, converted for them by Mr. and Mrs. Seaton into a ravishing* atelier *(see picture below).*

The magazine was dated July of the previous year. Nigel put it down and approached another table which stood before an artist's throne. On this table stood a round object concealed by a cloth. Nigel took off the cloth. What he saw made him draw in his breath sharply. It was a head. Molded in clay. A head, unmistakably, of Robert Seaton. The object made every single canvas in the studio look third rate: It had an extraordinary power and vitality. But the shocking thing was that the face of the poet had been given an abominable untruth. Every feature was perfectly recognizable, almost photographically correct; yet the whole effect was one of evil—a sultry, gloating kind of evil. It was the face of a devil, basking in his own damnation.

"Crikey," murmured Nigel, putting back the cloth.

"How dare you do that!" came the furious voice of Mara Torrance from the doorway. She slammed down the coffee tray on a table, and thrust herself between Nigel and the clay head, almost as if protecting it. "How dare you go prying at my work!"

"So *you* did it?"

"I hate people looking at my things when they're unfinished. Sorry to break out like that," she said, more equably.

"Unfinished? I see."

"What d'you mean?"

"Well, I was going to ask if that's the way you really see Robert Seaton."

"Oh. Oh no." A bewildered look came into her face. Her voice went small and faltering. "I don't know how it got like that," she said. "I—it frightens me. I'd better start again."

"It's very good, though. Very good indeed. Terrifyingly good."

"What's very good?" said her father, coming into the room. Nigel indicated the head.

"Oh, that. Yes, Mara has inherited some of my gift. It'll be one in the eye for Janet, anyway." Rennell Torrance sniggered fatly, plumped himself down in a chair and poured out a cup of coffee. "Well, she asked for it."

"Asked for it?"

"Yuh. A few days ago—when was it, Mara?—last Saturday—Janet was in here. We got talking modern art. Hopeless old bourgeoise, Janet is. Mara got a bit heated. About the abstract chaps. That's Mara's usual line, you know—three curves and a twiddle, label it 'Object,' and bob's your uncle. Anyway, Janet said Mara couldn't do a portrait bust, a realistic job so's you could recognize the sitter, not if she tried for a hundred years. Janet said people only do that abstract stuff because they're incapable of straight naturalism. Pretty crude of old Janet, I must say, though I wouldn't altogether disagree with her. Anyway, this chump here, my daughter, proceeds to fall for it, hook, line and sinker. 'Oh, can't I just?' she says in effect. So she roped in Robert and got him to sit for her."

"And you think it *is* a good likeness?" said Nigel after a moment's pause.

"Oh, it was coming along pretty well. Haven't looked at it for a day or two."

He hauled himself out of his basket chair, slouched over to the table and took the cloth off the head. Nigel saw his fat back go rigid. A queer sound came from the man's throat. He almost overturned the head by the violence with which he flung the cloth over it again. As he stumbled back to his chair, his pasty face was green.

"Sorry," he said. "My heart goes wrong on me now and then. Mara, get me a drop of brandy, there's a good girl."

"I'll get you some water. You had quite enough brandy after lunch."

When the girl had left the room, Nigel said, "It's not really Robert Seaton, is it?"

"What the devil d'you mean? Who else should it be?" The painter spoke with remarkable vehemence for a man who had just had a heart attack. "Robert sat for it. Ask Janet. She made him sit for it."

"What I meant was that it's not Robert Seaton's normal expression," replied Nigel, mildly and quite truthfully. . . .

Soon after nine o'clock that evening, Superintendent Blount drove up to Paul Willingham's farm. His first words to Nigel were,

"So you're going to stay at Plash Meadow next week, I hear. That's vairy convenient."

"Glad you approve. But let me tell you this, Blount: I'm much more interested in Robert Seaton's poetry than his homicidal tendencies, if any. I shall do my best to defeat the ends of justice, should it prove necessary. We haven't so many good poets in the country that we can afford to hang one."

The superintendent looked extremely shocked at this unethical statement. Then his face took on the gratified expression of the Scot who has tracked down a joke singlehanded.

"I doubt you're pulling my leg, Strangeways. Of course, we have no grounds for suspicion against Mr. Seaton, as yet. But the household in general—that's another matter."

Blount proceeded to enlarge on this. After the information Nigel had given him this morning, he had narrowed his inquiries in Ferry Lacey to the period round about midnight of Thursday last week. He had discovered that a woman, living in the cottage nearest to the Seatons' gardener's cottage, had been expecting a baby that night. Her husband had gone to the call box shortly after 11 P.M. and telephoned to the doctor. The doctor was out at another confinement, but the message would be given to him on his return. The husband—it was his wife's first child—had been anxious. From midnight till nearly one in the morning, when the doctor had finally arrived, he had stayed out of the house, either in the porch or the road, awaiting the doctor's arrival. He was quite certain that, during this period, no one had come down the path which led from the right-of-way across the fields, past his cottage, into the road. This evidence, if it could be relied on, must imply that the unknown man had taken the left-hand fork of the right-of-way, leading to Plash Meadow.

"And another significant fact," Blount went on. "This chap tells me he saw Mr. Seaton walking down the road, toward Plash Meadow, a while before the doctor arrived. He couldn't be exact about the time: thought it might have been about quarter to one."

"Did you ask Seaton about this?"

"Yes. He said he'd been out for a walk. He often walks at night, it seems—nothing unusual about it. And he'd taken shelter for a wee while when the first thunderstorm came on."

"I see," said Nigel slowly. "Of course, when you're anxiously waiting for a doctor to arrive, time goes very slowly."

"What's in your mind?" Blount glanced at him keenly.

"There seems to be something wrong with the timetable. Seaton ought to have got home before 12:30. However, I expect this worried young husband misjudged the time. Or else Mara Torrance got it wrong."

Nigel told Blount the substance of his conversation with Miss Torrance.

"Oho. We must look into that," said Blount formidably. "Well now. Trains. There's an express from Bristol, gets in at Chillingham Junction at 10:58. And another, from the South Wales ports, which gets in at 10:19. They were both running up to time that night. The Bristol one sounds the more likely, on the face of it. The ticket collector can't help. But Gates has made inquiries at and near by the station: no evidence of anyone hanging around there between 10:19 and eleven o'clock. No reason why he should hang about, as far as we know. On the other hand, Gates hasn't found any witness yet who saw our man walking away from the Junction on the road to Ferry Lacey. But it's early days yet for that. Gates'll be making inquiries all along the road, as far as Foxhole Wood."

"I take it you've not found the man's head yet, or his clothes?"

Blount shrugged his shoulders. The county police had examined the grounds of Plash Meadow, and every allotment and cottage garden in the village, soon after the discovery of the corpse. But you couldn't go digging up the whole countryside in search of one head: and none of the village people had reported sounds of digging that night. Blount had asked the Seatons' gardener, only this morning, if he'd noticed any signs of freshly dug earth in their garden on the Friday, any implements out of place in the tool shed. He had not. "Though, mind you," Blount added, "these country people are vairy close. I'd no' put it past them to lie themselves black in the face to protect the Seatons—the Laceys, perhaps I should say. It's a vairy feudal type of community still."

This very afternoon, shortly after Nigel had left, two of Blount's men had begun a thorough search of Plash Meadow. Mrs. Seaton had made no objection, when the superintendent asked her permission, though she had insisted on following them round the downstairs rooms to make sure they didn't damage her priceless possessions. Nothing at all had been found. In the meantime, Blount had interviewed every member of the household. They told him nothing that Nigel hadn't heard already about the Thursday night.

"Of course, I could get no sense out of that unco wee dwarf," said Blount. "He juist yammered at me. And I've yet to interview Miss Torrance. She'd gone out when I arrived."

Inspector Gates had found no traces of blood anywhere in the farm buildings during his original search. This afternoon, Blount had questioned the dairyman. But the result was again negative.

"Why the dairyman?" asked Nigel.

"Well, you see, the dairy is tiled. It could easily be hosed down."

"At night? But that'd be a frightful risk, surely? Somebody might hear."

"Not if it was done—e'eh—while a thundershower was in process. But the dairyman could not definitely say that the place had been sluiced down since he hosed it himself the evening before."

"I still think you're concentrating far too much on Plash Meadow."

Blount looked wounded. "Indeed I'm not. I've an open mind. But the murdered man was last seen walking in that direction. And the house stands a little away from the rest of the village. You'd think, if he'd gone anywhere else, to one of the cottages, say, and been killed there, and his head and clothes somehow disposed of—well, all the odds are that one of the neighbors would have heard something, noticed something wrong and started gossiping, isn't that so? We've got to make a start somewhere."

"Any of the Plash Meadow household taken a trip recently?"

"Mr. Lionel Seaton went up to London last Saturday: staying the week end with friends. We're following that up, of course. None of the others left the neighborhood. Och, but they've had all the time on earth to get rid of the clothes."

"But the head wouldn't be so easy to get rid of?"

"An old house like Plash Meadow will have two-three secret panels and suchlike, I dare say. But I can't go tearing the place apart till I've some more evidence."

"Till you know whose head you're looking for, eh?" asks Nigel.

"Just so." Blount gave him a meditative look. "Tell me, Strangeways, do you know anything about Mr. Seaton's brother?"

"Oswald Seaton? I know he's dead, if that helps you at all."

"Och aye. He's legally dead, all right."

"How d'you mean, 'legally' dead?"

"He committed suicide. Ten years ago. Drowned himself. In the Bristol Channel."

"Well?"

"But, you see, the body was never found."

Nigel sat back and threw up his hands. "Really, Blount, this is too much! D'you mean he left his head on the beach and—"

"I mean he, the *corpus,* the man Oswald Seaton, was not found. He left a pile of clothes and a suicide note in the boat he jumped out of. Finis. Body never recovered. But the tides are tricky thereabouts. He died intestate. Robert Seaton, being his next-of-kin, applied for letters of administration. In due course, after all possible inquiries had been made, the court gave leave to presume death, and so Robert came in for the property. The suicide note was perfectly genuine—business worries and so on —people had noticed Oswald Seaton acting strangely, some days before —worried, drawn looking and all that. But nothing criminal: he hadn't been embezzling; nothing to suggest a *fake* suicide: otherwise, of course, leave to presume death wouldn't have been near so readily given."

"Who told you all this? His brother?"

"Robert Seaton corroborated it just now. But I knew it before. We look up the records of anyone even remotely associated with a case, as you well know."

"Well, then, if it was a perfectly straightforward suicide—"

"Yes, there it is." Blount sighed. "But he'd have fitted the requirements. A man who knew this countryside well enough to take the short cut through Foxhole Wood, but hadn't been here for ten years—since that gate was wired up—otherwise he'd not have tried to get out of the wood that way. And it is a funny thing, too," Blount added musingly, "you and your 'head of a traveler'—he'd been one. Head traveler for his father's firm. Manufacturers of electrical equipment."

"What about the original police report on the suicide? No distinguishing marks on the body? Can't Robert Seaton help?"

Blount shook his head. "It'd be something if we could definitely eliminate the possibility that the murdered man was Oswald Seaton. But, as it so happens, what with the state of the corpse here, and the period of years that has passed, Robert Seaton couldn't be expected to identify it. The original report is rather negative on distinguishing marks—no bones broken, no birthmarks. Age, height, size of feet and hands—they correspond pretty well: but that part of the description would fit hundreds of men. No, Strangeways, I should simply be wasting my time trying to link up this murder here with a ten-year-old suicide—"

"Disappearance, you mean."

"If you like to be pedantic. But the police and the probate court were satisfied. That ought to be good enough for us."

"I think," said Nigel after a pause, "I shall have to do some digging on my own, then."

"Digging? Where?"

"Digging up the past."

Nigel's first excavations took place the next morning, the site being Paul Willingham. The gist of the their leisurely conversation, as Paul unloaded his memory in the little stock-scented kitchen garden of the farm, tabulated itself for Nigel under the headings of F. for fact and H. for hearsay, something like this:

(F.) Old Mr. Lacey, father of Janet, lost heavily in slump of 1930. Compelled to sell Plash Meadow: Sold it to James Seaton, father of Oswald and Robert, successful manufacturer of electrical equipment, self-made man, factory in Redcote, other side of river. Old Mr. Lacey died soon after. Janet and her mother took cottage in Ferry Lacey. (H.) Janet set cap at Oswald: nothing doing.

(F.) Oswald and Robert—boyhood in Redcote when it was a small, unspoiled market town—familiar with countryside, fished in Thames at Ferry Lacey, etc.

(F.) Oswald went into father's business: worked way up: head traveler: was virtually running business from 1932 to 1936, when the father, already invalidish though indomitable, died.

(F.) James Seaton: a hard, strait-laced man—petty bourgeois, nonconformist conscience. Left whole property to Oswald. Robert cut off with shilling many years before, because (a) he had married, very young, against his father's wishes, a beautiful but lowborn Redcote girl, (b) he had refused to go into the family business, announced determination to support self by writing. (H.) Robert had very bad time in early years; great poverty; first wife died of (?) malnutrition, (?) lack of medical care.

(F.) After father's death, Robert, a widower now, paid long visit to Plash Meadow. (H.) Janet set cap at *him,* Oswald not having come up to scratch. (F.) They became engaged in 1938, shortly after Oswald's suicide. Robert sold factory when leave to presume Oswald's death had gone through. In spite of death duties, very well off on proceeds. (H.) General gossip in countryside that Janet married him to get Plash Meadow back for the Laceys.

(F.) Torrances first turned up in district about 1937. Caravan holiday in August. Rennell Torrance had already divorced wife, obtained custody of only child, Mara, then about fourteen. They returned, caravanning, the next summer. Nothing further known of them till they came to live in the old tithe barn in 1945. No known connection, before then, between Torrances and Seatons.

(F.) Finny Black: brought back to Plash Meadow by Robert and Janet Seaton after their honeymoon. No account given of his provenance. The pair honeymooned in Dorset. (H.) Village gossip that Finny is Robert's bastard son.

"So there you are," said Paul, leaning back in his deck chair and gently fishing a stray bee out of his beer mug. "That's the best I can do for you. What d'you make of it? What's your theory?"

"I haven't one."

"Well I have then. I suggest to you that the man we know as Robert Seaton is not Robert Seaton at all."

"Indeed? Who is he?"

"Brother Oswald. Oswald had the reputation of being a bad hat. Addiction to popsies—the younger the better. He gets into bad trouble over one, fakes a suicide, pays Robert a large bribe to clear out of the country, shaves off his beard—"

"Oh, he had a beard, did he?"

"—yes, and returns to Plash Meadow impersonating Robert. He was only a couple of years older, after all, and quite like Robert to look at."

"So alike that Lionel and Vanessa were taken in?"

"Well, they hadn't seen their father much the last few years, after his wife died. He sent them to live with relations, you know. Janet, of course, realizes the truth and thus blackmails Oswald into marrying her. Then, ten years later, Robert returns from abroad. Oswald is threatened with exposure and slays him. How about that for a solution? Bang-on, wouldn't you say?"

"It's a mass of large holes, with nothing even to tie them together. On what do you base this farcical theory?"

"On the fact that the alleged Robert Seaton has written no poetry for the last ten years," said Paul, leaning earnestly forward.

"But—"

"You've only got his word for it, and Janet's, that he's been composing an epic of the First World War. Very shaky, old boy. Don't you believe it. All those tiddly little notebooks you brought back yesterday—nothing new in them, is there? You ask him for the manuscript of something he's written since 1938. Bet you a pint you don't get it."

"And where do the Torrances come in?"

"The Torrances? Well, let me see now; I hadn't got them in the picture yet. I know!—Torrance, waking from a drunken stupor on the dunes, sees Oswald lay a heap of clothes and suicidal note at the brink of the

Bristol Channel, then slink off inland again. He investigates, discovers the hanky-panky, and blackmails Oswald up to the eyeballs. So 'Robert,' the *ci-devant* Oswald, has to provide Torrance with a cozy home for life."

Nigel gazed gravely at his friend.

"I think you had better stick to agriculture," he said.

Paul grinned. "You reject my reconstruction *in toto?* Can't say I'm surprised. I only thought it up a minute ago."

"Nevertheless," said Nigel, "you've laid your clumsy great fingers on two quite crucial points. I wonder—. D'you know anyone round here who knew the Seatons well in the old days?"

Paul thought for a bit. "There's old Keeley. Edits the *Redcote Gazette.* He's a local man: might be able to help. I could give you an introduction to him. In fact, I could drive you over tomorrow morning. I promised him some eggs, and I've got to see a man about a calf—that takes care of the petrol aspect. Then I can drop you off at Plash Meadow on the way back."

At 11:30 the next morning, Nigel was sitting in the editor's room. Paul had made an appointment for him by telephone, and brought him in to the *Redcote Gazette* office, a dingy building near the station.

Mr. Keeley, a gray-haired, fatherly-looking man in shirt sleeves, took the basket of eggs from Nigel and plumped it down in the litter on his desk.

"Thank Mr. Willingham very much, will you? The wife'll be glad of these. Funny how we've got back to the old system of barter these days."

"And what does Paul get in exchange?" Nigel ventured.

"Ah, that'd be telling," said Mr. Keeley comfortably. "Sit down, do. Here, let me clear a chair for you." The editor seemed to have all time at his disposal. He loaded a pipe in a leisurely manner; rang for cups of tea: only when these were brought did he sit back in the editorial chair, and with the guarded, slightly uneasy look of the journalist who finds himself for once at the giving end of an interview, ask Nigel what he could do for him.

Nigel had decided to put his cards on the table. He spoke of his association with Superintendent Blount, and his acquaintance with Robert Seaton. He said he wanted to fill in the picture of the Seatons' past, of which he only knew the bare outlines at present. He hinted that, on the barter principle, he would do his best in return for Mr. Keeley's reminiscences, to see that the *Redcote Gazette* got an exclusive story of the Ferry Lacey affair as soon as it could be released.

"What's this Ferry Lacey murder to do with Bob Seaton?"

"Ah, that'd be telling."

"I don't know that the *Gazette* is so interested in exclusive stories, Mr. Strangeways. We're not Fleet Street. And we have a high opinion of Mr. Seaton in these parts."

"You can't have a higher opinion of him than I have. Police investigations are a hellish experience for anyone who gets involved, and I want to take the brunt of this one off him as much as possible."

"Aye, he's had enough trouble in his life, has Bob. I'm not keen to make any more for him."

"Believe me, Mr. Keeley," said Nigel earnestly, "I'd not be here if I thought there was any danger of that. It's simply that this investigation has become concentrated on Plash Meadow, let's hope only temporarily. I admire Seaton tremendously. I'd like to help him, and his family of course. But I can't until I know more of the background."

The editor gave Nigel a long, considering look. Then he lumbered to the door, half-opened it, called out, "Mr. Arthur, I'm not to be disturbed for half an hour," and sat down again.

"You knew Seaton as a boy?" Nigel asked.

"Aye, we grew up together here—him and me and Oswald. Went to school together and got up to all sorts of mischief."

"Old Mr. Seaton, their father, was a bit of a terror, so I gather."

"He lived according to his lights, Mr. Strangeways. He put Redcote on the map, give him that. Started with a little shop and worked up to this factory. Regular, old-fashioned success story. Oh, he was a genius in his way. But Redcote's not been the same since. It's a betwixt-and-between sort of place now—half industrial, half rural—can't make up its mind what it is. Not that James Seaton cared what happened to Redcote. He was out to make his pile; and he made it; and then he tried to become a country gentleman."

"But, as a person, a father?"

Mr. Keeley very deliberately moved a pot of paste to one side of his desk, took up a pencil and began doodling. The Oxfordshire accent became more noticeable in his voice.

"I don't mind telling you, my blood boils even now when I think of the way he treated those two. Beatings, browbeatings, sermons, emotional outbursts. He was Chapel, you know. A real hell-fire Puritan. And damned tricky in business, like those canting Chapel hypocrites are apt to be. That's off the record—must remember my local advertisers! I suppose, in a way, it helped to make Bob a poet. He had to escape, and writing was *his* escape. But it's a wonder he wasn't warped for life, like his brother."

"Poets have a pretty hard center."

"Aye, he was always tough in his way, was Bob—what's the word?—resilient. Old James Seaton had to respect him for it. He found it was dangerous—well, useless—to try and drive Bob too far."

"How d'you mean?"

"Well, when Bob was just down from Oxford—he'd got a scholarship and his father had been all over him for a bit—he fell in love with Daisy Summers. She worked in the factory. A sweet, pretty girl, good as gold—aye, she was the belle of Redcote. But it wouldn't do for James Seaton. His son marrying a factory hand, a workman's daughter, oh dear me no! There was a fearful row. Bob married her, of course: he stood up to his father all right. But that, on top of his refusing to go into the firm—well, it finished him for James. Proper old-fashioned send-off he got. 'Never you darken my doors again.' And he didn't. He went to France in 1917. When he was demobbed, he and Daisy had a terrible bad time. I used to see quite a lot of them: I was in Fleet Street then. Bob scraped along on odd jobs—a bit of journalism here, a bit of lecturing there—anything so long as he could have plenty of spare time to write his poetry. It's a bitter business, that hand-to-mouth kind of life. And with a wife and child—. Still, they were happy, oh magnificently happy, taking it all in all. Till the second child came. Daisy got very ill. Bob pocketed his pride and wrote to his father asking for money. First time he'd done it. But he was older now, and you don't fuss about your pride so much when you're older. Well, James Seaton had forgotten nothing and forgiven nothing. He wrote back to say Bob could come into the business, if he'd give up his writing. Would you believe it? Bob was pretty well known as a poet by then, too. But old James thought of poetry and the theater, and all that sort of thing, as the Devil's work. I believe Bob might have done it, given it up, for Daisy's sake, only she wouldn't hear of such a thing. She was a stanch lass. No, perhaps he wouldn't have, after all. Anyway, she died. He hadn't the money to send her abroad, which the doctors said would save her. So she died. I don't like to think what his feelings were. It was his poetry, when you get down to the bottom of it—his poetry which had killed her. And only a year or two afterward, James himself died. Too late. Poor old Bob, he's had a hard life. You hear people talk about the elevating effects of poverty—the Artist-in-the-Garret stuff. By God, Bob could tell them. I reckon he'd do anything rather than go through all that again."

There was a silence. Then Nigel asked, "Weren't you surprised that he married again?"

"No. He was lonely: he wanted a mother for Vanessa: he'd found marriage a happy state of affairs. But I *was* surprised he married Janet Lacey. Or that she married him. She's a high-and-mighty one, for all that her family had come down in the world."

"Perhaps she took pity on him?"

"He on her, just as likely. He's always been apt to do unexpected, quixotic things. He's a queer mixture. That dwarf he has—d'you know, Bob told me he'd found him being stoned by a gang of louts in a village near where he and Janet were honeymooning, so he up and brought him home to Ferry Lacey, just like that. Don't know how he got round his missus."

"She seems very fond of the dwarf now."

"No children of her own. But old Bob gets what he wants, in his quiet way. God knows how he does it."

"Perhaps because he doesn't want much."

"Concentrates, you mean? Very likely. He'd need it all, to put anything over on his present missus. Talk about a will of iron! Why, she runs Ferry Lacey and Hinton Lacey, and she'd run Redcote too if she got half a chance. She's fifty years behind the times; but she believes so strongly in herself as Lady of the Manor and the Last of the Laceys, and in whatever she's doing, that she carries everything before her. I wouldn't care to get in her way. My predecessor here printed an editorial criticizing something highhanded she'd done in local affairs—this was before she married—and dammit if she didn't turn up at the office next day with a hunting crop! Only one thing she wanted and never got."

"What was that?"

"Oswald Seaton. Not that she wanted *him*. It was Plash Meadow, the Laceys' old property—that's what she was after. Yes, she'd even marry a fellow like him to get back the Laceys' inheritance: shows the strength of a ruling passion, doesn't it? But she'd met her match for once."

"What was Oswald like?"

Mr. Keeley raised his eyes. "If I tell you that her worst enemy wouldn't have wished Oswald onto Janet Lacey, it'll give you some idea. *De mortuis* and all that, but he was a thorough-paced rotter. Efficient enough in the business. But his father's upbringing ruined him as a human being. He was sly, specious, wriggle out of anything. And *cruel!* I don't know that it *was* all his father's fault, even. I remember—Oswald was only about seven then—going into their house and hearing Oswald's voice: he was saying, 'I'm going to put your feet into the fire first, and you'll scream. Then I'll put your legs in, and you'll scream louder and louder, but I shan't have mercy. All your blood will boil and bubble. It's hell's fire, and I'm going to burn you up in it bit by bit.' I went into the room. He was just putting his sister's doll through the bars of the grate. I've believed in original sin ever since that day, Mr. Strangeways."

"So his death was no loss?"

The editor, his tongue pushed against the side of his mouth, executed a particularly elaborate doodle on the blotting pad before replying.

"That suicide. Yes. He was not universally lamented. I couldn't have been happier myself. I've a couple of daughters, and between you and me and this pencil, nobody's daughters were safe with Oswald Seaton about. Well, I *could* have been happier still. If they'd found the body."

"But surely—"

"Oh, I know there was no doubt about it really. But, as I told you, Oswald could wriggle out of anything."

"Wriggle out of his own death, even?"

"He'd have a damned good shot at it."

"Why did he commit suicide?"

"Business worries. That's what they said. He left a letter, you know. All tidied up."

"But you don't quite believe it?"

"When a rat's cornered," said Mr. Keeley with a sober emphasis, "it fights. I won't say the Seaton business wasn't having a difficult time just then: there was severe foreign competition, for one thing. But—oh well—" he rumpled his white hair "—I've rambled on long enough. Is there anything else?"

"I suppose your paper carried a long report of Oswald Seaton's death. I'd like to see the file copies, if it's not troubling you too much."

"Yes, we did. Janet Lacey threw her weight about a lot—tried to have it hushed up. I'm afraid she doesn't like the *Redcote Gazette* one little bit. So I don't see as much of Bob Seaton as I'd wish. But then, he's a famous man now. Aye, it's a long time since we split our infinitives side by side in grammar school. And I'm still splitting 'em."

Nigel thanked the editor warmly for his help. After a quarter of an hour's reading in the *Gazette* library, where he studied the suicide of Oswald Seaton in the paper's back numbers and in a sheaf of clippings from other journals, Nigel left the building. He and Paul Willingham had lunch together at the Golden Lion. As they were getting into Paul's car, Nigel, who had been very distrait during lunch, said,

"Could you stop at a toy shop on the way out?"

"Any toy shop?"

"Yes."

Paul Willingham gave him a sharp look; then, checking whatever facetious comment Nigel's request had brought to the tip of his tongue, let in the clutch.

Chapter 5

Head in Clay

Nigel Strangeways was reclining in a deck chair on the lawn. The little pile of Robert Seaton's notebooks lay on a table at his side: but, whether it was the house standing there before him, like a beautiful woman, demanding all his attention, or whether it was the hazy, stilly closeness in the air, through which the weir hummed and roared more insistently, he could not turn his mind to the poet's manuscripts. Everything this afternoon seemed as if charged with fatality. What was the weir distantly, insistently trying to say? A petal detached itself from one of the tarnished roses on the house front and went dithering down to earth, and when it landed, Nigel positively relaxed, as though he had expected the earth to be shaken by its fall. A dove suddenly cooing in a treetop high overhead startled him like a siren.

Nigel mentally shook himself, took up one of the notebooks. But it lay open on his lap, unregarded. The beautiful house would allow no rival. So you're jealous, he found himself idiotically murmuring; are you trying to vamp me, or to get rid of me? I can deal with flesh-and-blood charmers. But a brick-and-mortar one, older than the subsoil on which she sits, older in experience, ripe and bursting with the juice of human hopes, human graces and tragedies—ah, take your glassy eyes off me!

Deliberately and rudely, Nigel got up, turned the back of his chair to the house. He had seen it last June, lapped in its rose-sleep. He had seen it last week, looking flushed, a little frowsty, but more vital, more of this world, as if it had just wakened up. And this afternoon, Plash Meadow was changed again for him. It had come nearer. It was appealing now, he fancifully put it, not through its beauty any more, but out of its frailty: the fine features, the disdainful look had melted into an expression of pretty helplessness. Or was it something worse? Was it apprehension? Panic? Guilt?

Nigel spoke aloud, half-turning his head:

"Oh, do shut up! You're driving me crackers."

"But I haven't said a word yet."

Nigel started convulsively and looked round. It was only Lionel Seaton, who had approached noiselessly over the lawn.

"Sorry," said Nigel, "I was talking to your house."

"Sorry to interrupt the conversation," remarked the young man politely. "I sympathize with you, though."

"Eh? What? Oh, it drives you crackers too, does it?"

"Sometimes." Lionel Seaton sat down cross-legged on the grass in front of him, his eyes fixed on Nigel's face. "It's about time I got away."

"A job, you mean?"

"Yes. Of course I was only demobbed last year. Janet'd have liked me to go up to Oxford. But—" the clipped, army voice broke off.

"But you want to be out on your own?" Nigel suggested.

"Yep. If I knew what to do. Unfortunately I went straight into the army from school. I'm not equipped for anything, except killing people. Might emigrate. Australia seems keen on getting British to go out."

"That's a long way away."

"It couldn't be too far away from Europe for my liking."

"I suppose," said Nigel tentatively, after a pause, "your father does cast rather a big shadow."

Lionel Seaton gave him a sharp, rather hostile look. "There's nothing wrong with—"

"I meant it must be difficult to be the son of a genius."

"Oh, I see. Yes. In that sense they both cast rather a big shadow."

"Your stepmother too?"

"Yep. They don't need me here. Neither of them."

"Well then, there's nothing to keep you."

"You think not? There's the police, for one thing."

"They won't be here forever. What else?"

Lionel Seaton was silent for a few moments, gazing meditatively at Nigel, who felt that the name of Mara Torrance was not far from his lips.

"Vanessa," said Lionel at last. "I'd like to see her through."

"See her through what?"

"Well, Janet does her best," the young man returned rather obliquely. "But they don't get on exactly like a house on fire, as you've noticed. And my father—well, he's got his work; and then, it was Vanessa's birth which really caused our mother's death; so he naturally—. But I'd like to see her safely married. She's the sort of girl who might fall for some fearful type, you know—some winsome, neurotic egotist. She's madly vulnerable."

"She'll have to make her own mistakes."

"Well, at any rate I can see her through this present dust-up," said Lionel slowly, his keen face averted.

"It shouldn't affect her, surely?"

"Oh come now," Lionel replied impatiently. "Not affect her, with the police pretty well drawing a cordon round Plash Meadow? We've had 'em in and out for a week. They seem to have got it into their heads, God knows why, that this chap was bumped off hereabouts."

He paused, as if inviting comment or denial. When none was forthcoming, he looked straightly at Nigel.

"I hope we can trust you."

"Trust me?"

"You know very well what I mean," the young man formidably replied. "No fifth-column work."

"I'm neutral. At present. I admire your father very much."

"He's taken to you, too. So there's all the more reason why—"

"All of you seem in a conspiracy to protect him," interrupted Nigel. "But, from what I've seen of your father, he can look after himself quite adequately."

"Oh, do you think so?" Lionel Seaton had the air of one giving impartial thought to an unexpected point of view. "Well, you may be right. But it's not at all the tradition in our family."

"Ah, that's his negative capability. He's a poet. He's so receptive to the person or thing he's involved with at the moment that each person sees in your father an image of himself."

"I don't follow you."

"Well, take Paul Willingham. His first words to me about your father were, 'He's a good sort. Quiet little chap. Got a fine herd of Guernseys.' Mr. Keeley called him tough, resilient. His family thinks of him as a rare, delicate vessel which has got to be protected."

"You mean he plays up to everyone's different ideas of him?"

"Unconsciously, yes. But it's more than that. He *becomes* the person he's with, almost."

The young man considered this. "And what does he become, with you?"

"Why, an amateur criminologist, of course. He got terrifically excited the other day when I was giving a description of the kind of man this chap who was murdered must be. Turned into a regular sleuth-on-the-trail for a moment. He was absolutely impersonal—said it might have been a description of his brother Oswald."

"He did, did he?" said Lionel, with what Nigel could have sworn was an admiring intonation. "Hello, there's Finny with the tea things. My father's a hero to *him,* anyway. Does that mean, according to your theory, that Finny's really a hero himself."

Nigel laughed. "Oh, you mustn't ride my hobbyhorse too hard."

"As a matter of fact, he is. He rescued my father once from the bull we used to have. Stood right in its path, and beat it off with a stick. Jolly good show by the little imp. But he's strong as a lion."

"Strong and silent. Is he completely dumb, in fact?"

"To the best of our knowledge. Why?"

"When I was here in June, your stepmother talked about him as a Fool who said such wise things. Don't you remember?"

"Oh, that's just Janet's nonsense. Haven't you ever heard a doting woman use exactly the same words about her dog?"

"I see."

They fell silent as Finny Black approached. He laid the tea table under the cedar tree beside them, without his usual nods and becks and wreathed smiles. The dwarf almost scowled at Nigel: there were beads of sweat on his little, hideous face, and his movements lacked their usual deftness.

"Looks as if there might be a thunderstorm before long," said Lionel, mopping his forehead. "Phew, it's close, isn't it?"

The front door of Plash Meadow opened. Robert and Janet Seaton emerged. As they approached across the lawn, a piercing momentary qualm transfixed Nigel Strangeways. He had observed that the poet was carrying his head under his arm.

"Not bad, is it?" said Robert Seaton, carefully placing the head on the table.

Mara Torrance had done something to it since Nigel saw it last. The evil had gone out of it; but so had the vitality. It was now a very respectable, dead likeness.

"I'll ring the hand bell if I want some more hot water," said Janet to Finny Black, who was staring at the head with a wild, intent, puzzled expression. He lolloped away, glancing back over his shoulder several times.

"You shouldn't have let Finny see it," said Lionel. "It might upset him. This afternoon, particularly."

"Oh, nonsense," said Robert robustly. "Why should it? How d'you like it, Strangeways?"

"Well, it's a good photograph."

Janet Seaton bent her prominent eyes upon him. "But the spirit is not there? I entirely agree with you. A piece of laborious, insipid realism, nothing more. It would do very well for the Royal Academy."

"Oh, you mustn't be hard on Mara," said Robert, laughing. "After all, you challenged her yourself to produce a good likeness. It's not her usual line at all."

"She shouldn't have undertaken it, then," replied Janet Seaton censoriously. "Are you interested in the plastic arts, Mr. Strangeways?"

"Moderately."

The remarkable woman went off into a lecture on non-representational sculpture, thickly larded with expressions like "cubic factors," "pure meaning," "plane, volume and tension," "dynamic correlation of masses," "hyperconscious equilibrium."

There was a respectful silence round the tea table when she had finished, broken at last by her husband's saying,

"Is that, er, what you're going to tell the Women's Institute on Saturday?"

"I shall simplify it for them, naturally," his wife replied, with a lack of humor which Nigel found quite devastating.

"Janet has been reading it all up in an article by Herbert Read, I suspect," said Robert Seaton. There was a certain mischievousness about the remark which did not seem quite in character.

Nigel indicated the pile of notebooks.

"I'd like to come and beard you in your den this evening, if I may," he said to Robert.

"Of course. About six? I've got to do a bit more work on a poem first."

"It's going well, is it?"

A faint, secretive smile, like that of a shy child receiving a bag of sweets, gave the poet's face a beatific expression.

"Yes, it's going well," he said, "it's all going very well, I think."

He rose, tucked his head under his arm again and walked briskly into the house.

At six o'clock Nigel entered Robert Seaton's study. The poet was sitting at his desk, the clay head in front of him. His face had a tranquil, drained look. They discussed certain points about one of the poems in the manuscript book on which Nigel had been working since tea. Then Robert Seaton rang the bell and asked Finny Black to bring up some sherry. Presently the dwarf returned with a decanter and glasses on a tray. He seemed unable to take his eyes off the clay head on Seaton's work table. His face twitched: it was white and puffy this evening, like a circus midget's.

"All right, Finny. You can go now," said the poet gently, and turned away to pour out the drinks.

Nigel, hands in pockets, had moved across to the work table and was bending over it.

Robert Seaton brought a glass of sherry to him.

"Here you are. Good lord, what the devil?—Did you do that?"

The sherry slopped over, as Seaton pointed at the clay head, which appeared to have grown, in one instant, a bristling and satyrlike beard.

"Yes," said Nigel.

"You have a remarkable turn for inverted metaphor, young man," said the poet. "Bearding me in my den, indeed!"

"I just wanted to see what it looked like. I bought the beard in a toy shop in Redcote this afternoon."

"And what *does* it look like?" asked Robert Seaton, his head cocked to one side in the attitude of a blackbird listening for a worm on the lawn.

"It looks exactly like the face of the satyr in that bit of wood carving by Mara Torrance—the one you showed me when I was here last June."

"By Jove, so it does! You're quite right," said the poet with animation. "You'd better take it off now. I wouldn't like Vanessa to wander in and see it. She mustn't see her father as a satyr. And really," he added, "I'm not one."

There was a curiously unembarrassed silence. The two men sat down in armchairs.

"Of course," said Nigel at last, "it's your affair. I ought to apologize for—well, unseemly curiosity."

"If it was just my affair—but, the trouble is, it's Mara's, much more than mine. It's Mara's secret."

"She admires you tremendously. She told me you'd been wonderfully kind to her in the past."

Robert Seaton made a deprecating gesture. "I fancy you have guessed something of the truth. Enough, anyway, for you to realize how carefully we must all go, just now," he said slowly. "Excitement is so bad for her. Any stirring up of the past. Let it lie, my dear fellow, if you can. No pranks of this sort with her."

"Of course not. But, you know, a police investigation is bound to stir up the past."

The poet sighed. "Yes, I suppose so. It's a great nuisance."

"I'm afraid it must be interfering with your work a lot."

That faint, inward smile showed on Robert Seaton's face again.

"Well, no, I can't pretend it does. I really seem to be finding it quite stimulating. And then, of course, Janet makes an admirable watchdog. I think even your friend the superintendent has his work cut out to get past her. He was in again this morning, by the way."

"Oh?"

"Apparently someone in the village saw me returning from a nocturnal prowl that night. And it doesn't fit in with the time when Mara said she'd seen Janet and me crossing the courtyard to have a look at Kitty. I presume the chap got it wrong. Your superintendent seemed quite satisfied anyway. But I don't like the idea of Mara being badgered."

Nigel forbore to remark that his friend the superintendent had an outstanding gift for *appearing* satisfied with a piece of evidence. What he actually said was,

"If you don't mind my offering a bit of advice, I hope you won't, through your natural wish to keep Miss Torrance's affairs secret, give the police the impression that you're being evasive about happenings in the much less remote past."

"This murder, eh? The police are welcome to everything I know about *it,"* replied Robert Seaton bravely.

"Good. Well, I'll go and have a wash before dinner."

A few minutes later, when Nigel was brushing his hair and singing to himself in his harsh baritone, the door of his room opened.

"I heard you singing," Vanessa said. "May I come in? I didn't know you were in here."

"Oh?"

"I mean, it isn't the usual guest room. That's the other side of the passage."

"Looking out over the courtyard?"

"Yes." Vanessa wandered inquisitively about the room, picking up Nigel's brushes, sniffing his shaving soap. She seemed to be screwing herself up to an important statement. "Phew, it's jolly stuffy, isn't it? Hadn't you better open a window. It's very unhealthy, sleeping with your window shut. Lieutenant—you know, she runs the Guides, I've told you about her—she does exercises in front of an open window every morning, summer or winter: she says every girl ought to; she says it's the best preparation for Healthy Motherhood." Vanessa cast a languishing glance at him. "You haven't any china dogs you don't want, by any chance, have you?"

"Do you collect them?"

"Yes. Would you like to see my collection? I started it last January. Felicity—she's my best friend—collects Egyptian scabs."

"What? Oh, scarabs?"

"Mm. I think they're rather eerie myself. I mean, there might be a curse on them. Buck up! What a time men take tying their ties and that sort of rot!"

She seized his hand and dragged him out of the room, down the passage. There, taking a key from her little reticule, she unlocked a door.

"See? Aren't they a lot of preciouses?" she said, pointing at the mantelpiece and breathing heavily with possessive pride.

Nigel examined the array of china dogs. "I like this one best," he said.

"Sssh! So do I actually," said Vanessa in a breathy whisper. "But you shouldn't say it out loud. That's favoritism. You'll hurt the feelings of all the other poor doggies."

"It's a valuable collection. D'you always keep the room locked?"

"In the daytime. Only I often forget to. And if you've any valuables, take my advice and keep your room locked too."

"But surely nobody—"

"Well, not intentionally. But things do sometimes disappear." Vanessa gazed at him earnestly. "It's supposed to be a family secret, but I'll tell *you.* We have a kleptomaniac in the house. It's very sad."

"Do you know who it is?"

The girl shook her hair over her face and gave him a coy glance through it. "I mustn't tell you that. But I expect you can guess." . . .

After dinner they had music. Lionel Seaton played Chopin preludes and some Schumann with considerable virtuosity, his keen, young-old face turned to an unearthly and abstract beauty in the darkening room. Presently, candles being lit, Vanessa was persuaded to sing. Her voice, singing Scots folk songs, was pure and thin and wavering as the candle flames, which shook from time to time with a waft of air through the open windows. After two or three songs, she stopped, saying it made her sweat all down her back. The atmosphere tonight was indeed oppressive, thick as lukewarm, congealing soup. Nigel felt a tension in the air; but whether it came from the elements alone, he could not say. At any moment he expected to hear the first mutter of thunder from beneath the distant rim of the sky. Janet Seaton, her fingers gripped tight together, half reclined on a window seat gazing out. Nigel fancied it was a relief to her when, at eleven o'clock, he said he was sleepy and would go to bed.

Up in his own room he did not undress, however, but took from his pocketbook a sheet of paper headed with a large question mark, and studied it. The notes were somewhat cryptic, jotted down from time to time during the last few days:

"(i) Mara's wood carving; the original expression on the clay head. Satyr. Satyromania? Poof! Was it O. or R.?"

Nigel took out his pencil and drew a line through "R."

"(ii) Is Finny Black really dumb?"

Nigel added, "No proof yet."

"(iii) Which was right, Robert/Janet or the expectant father? This could be crucial, IF. . . . Essential fix exact time thundershower began. Where did R. take shelter? Were his clothes wet when he got back? Etc.

"(iv) Who keeps key of (a) orchard gate, (b) dairy? How many keys?

"(v) Was R.T. really 'plastered' that evening? Did L.S. really sleep right through storm?

"(vi) Did L.S. arrive at friends' house that week end with same amount of luggage he left Plash Meadow with? (Blount).

"(vii) J.S. 'a stickler for the proprieties.' Why the T.'s then?"

Nigel added, "Depends on answer to (i)."

"(viii) The society magazine with photograph of family. Might explain much, IF. . . ."

Nigel now wrote in another question:

"(ix) Does or does not J.S. approve of abstract art? If answer *yes,* why the clay head? If *no,* why her line this afternoon?"

Nigel studied this last question. He was still picking away at it in his mind when a growl of thunder invaded his thoughts. He put the paper away, went to the window. The last dregs of light were draining out of the sky. Nigel moved away, silently opened his door, looked up and down the passage, then slipped into the room opposite—the one, Vanessa had told him, where guests usually slept. It was empty. Nigel very gently opened the lower half of its window and sat down on the window seat. The storm was approaching from this side, from the north. Congested, indigo clouds, darker than the night, were piled up untidily one on another in precarious heaps which it seemed a single thrust of lightning would send toppling over. The night held its breath, then released it in a sudden, hot puff which stirred the foliage of the chestnut tree. From behind the cloud-massif, a sheet of lightning flared up and shook the sky, outlining the fantastic scarps and ridges and pinnacles of the thunder-clouds. As Nigel watched, the lightning flickered more energetically, till it was almost continuous, darting and vibrating all over the tortured heavens. Like wagon wheels down a stony defile the thunder rumbled nearer.

Nigel felt in his pocket, to make sure his electric torch was there. He believed that something was going to happen tonight, and he believed he knew what it was. His eye turned more frequently now to the door of the wing to his right where the servants' quarters were. He waited a long time, his head out of the window now, his gaze alternately dazzled by lightning and muffled by the darkness which followed each flash.

Presently he became aware of a door slowly opening; not the door of the servants' wing, but one directly below him. He was not the only watcher at Plash Meadow tonight. Whoever it was down there who had opened the door, did not attempt to move: he must be standing on the threshold, looking out toward the courtyard, waiting. Nearly five minutes passed. Nigel became obsessed by a fancy that the person down below was waiting for a seventh great flash, so that he might dart out unseen through the ensuing trough of darkness, like a boy on a beach calculating the precise moment between two waves when he can dash to the water's edge and retrieve some treasure cast up by the storm.

Then at last the door of the servants' wing did open. The next moment a livid, protracted glare of lightning revealed a figure running full tilt across the courtyard. It moved with a scuttling, crablike gait, if you could imagine a crab running as fast as a man; but once it bounded into the air in the manner of a dog hunting through bracken, and as it did so Nigel saw something bounce upon its back. The figure was Finny Black—no doubt about that. And the thing on his back, the globular thing hanging from his shoulders that, glimpsed momently in a second flash of lightning, might have been a gross black spider riding him—

Nigel saw the figure swallowed up by another wave of blackness. There was a scrabbling noise. And when lightning lit up the scene again, nothing moved out there but the foliage of a lower branch of the chestnut tree. Nigel ran down the passage and quickly descended the stairs. A peal of thunder crashed over the house. As he emerged from the door, Nigel noticed a figure flitting over the courtyard. It was much bigger than Finny Black: the other watcher, no doubt.

Making a detour by the old tithe barn, Nigel approached the tree silently from the opposite side. He could hear a voice, calling gently out of the darkness at the foot of the tree:

"Finny! Come down, Finny! It's only me."

It was the voice of Janet Seaton, and there seemed to be a great sadness in its soothing tones.

From far above there came a scuffling noise, immediately drowned by a head-splitting crack of thunder. In the silence that followed, Mrs. Seaton quietly called,

"Come down, Finny, at once. And bring it with you. Bring it down with you. It's not yours, Finny."

She might have been gentling a restive horse. The lower branches shook. The figure of Finny Black appeared, swinging down from bough to bough with a horrible alacrity. He landed lightly at Janet Seaton's feet, jumping from the lowest bough. A flash of lightning showed a string bag dangling from his shoulders, and in the bag, as Mrs. Seaton took it from Finny, the clay head of her husband.

Nigel walked forward.

"Don't you think," he said, "while he's about it, he'd better fetch down the other one?"

Chapter 6

Head in Air

Janet Seaton whipped round, letting out a little scream. She shrank away from Nigel, till her back was against the giant bole of the chestnut tree.

"What are you doing here?" she exclaimed. "Go away! Finny! Help!"

The next moment, Nigel was fighting for his life. As if infected by her panic, or like a dog instinctively leaping to defend its mistress, Finny Black went for him. The dwarf jumped up upon Nigel, wound his legs round Nigel's waist, and groped for his throat. Taken completely by surprise, Nigel staggered a pace backward and, a little half-heartedly at first, tried to pry the dwarf off his chest. It was like fighting a child, so light was the body which had clamped itself to him—but a child, he soon realized, of uncanny strength. Finny's long arms were thick and sinewy as conger eels. His fingers sank into Nigel's throat. For a moment Nigel saw the dwarf's distorted, sweating face glaring into his like a mad baby's: then the face was hidden in his shoulder, where he could not get at it, and the fingers tightened.

Nigel threw himself forward on to the ground—it seemed the only hope—trying to stun the dwarf with his weight. Finny grunted as he hit the ground, and his arms fell away. He was lying quite still now, apparently stunned. Nigel began to get to his feet. "I hope to God I haven't broken his neck," he thought. But he was still only on his knees when the dwarf suddenly came to life again, rolled furiously to one side, and before Nigel could grab him had bounced up on to Nigel's back. Nigel was able to give one shout for help, then the fingers were gouging into his throat again. He staggered toward the tree, in a desperate attempt to knock Finny off against its trunk. But Finny clung to him like an adhesive bubble. Nigel was dimly aware of Janet Seaton hovering near by, giving little distracted cries and sobs, then ineffectually trying to tear the dwarf off his back. The pain in his throat became appalling. There was a continuous thunder in his ears, but whether it came from the sky or from inside his bursting head, he did not know. I must fall backward this time, he bemusedly thought. There were feet running—or was it the pounding of his heart? A voice called out sharply,

"Finny! Stop it at once! D'you hear? Stop it!"

Then Nigel, almost fainting, became aware that the steel fingers had gone from his throat, the midget weight from off his back. He sank down against the tree, harshly coughing and gasping.

"My dear chap, I'm terribly sorry. What on earth happened?" Robert Seaton was saying, out of the darkness.

Robert and Janet bent solicitously over him.

"I'll be all right in a minute," he croaked.

"I'll go and get some brandy," said Mrs. Seaton.

"And bring a towel or something, soaked in cold water," her husband called out as she went toward the house.

"I'm afraid it was my fault," Nigel whispered after a few moments, feeling his throat. "I alarmed your wife, and I suppose Finny thought she was in danger. Where is he?"

"He ran away. I really can't forgive myself for letting—. It's this thunderstorm. Finny always gets overexcited. I suppose Janet must have been looking for him. But he won't always obey her when he gets like this."

"I'm glad he obeys you, anyway. Look, could you go and ring up the police straight away? We must have a man here."

"Is it really necessary?" Robert Seaton's voice sounded painful. "I mean, couldn't we—couldn't you give him another chance?"

"I shan't prosecute Finny, or anything like that. Of course not. But he's got to be found. Quickly."

"Very well. Will it be all right if I leave you? Oh, here's Janet."

It was Janet. And Lionel Seaton. And, a minute after, Rennell Torrance came up with his daughter.

"I'm just going in to telephone," said Robert Seaton.

"Who's here? What's been happening?" asked Torrance in a thick voice.

"Didn't someone shout?" said Lionel. "It woke me up."

"Here's your brandy, Mr. Strangeways. I'll put this towel round your neck. Don't try and move yet. There. I came out to look for Finny," Mrs. Seaton explained to the others, "and Mr. Strangeways must have heard us, and he came out too and rather startled me. I didn't realize who it was. Then Finny attacked him. I'm dreadfully—"

"Is that Finny over there?" said Nigel.

As they all looked away, peering into the darkness, Nigel poured his brandy on to the grass. He had no reason to suppose there was anything but brandy in the glass; but he could take no risks just now. He must stay by the tree till the police came.

"I always told you you ought to get rid of him," said Torrance grumpily. "It simply isn't safe. Well, if there's nothing I can do, I'm going back to bed. Jesus! What's this?"

The man's foot, as he turned to go, had kicked against the clay head, lying forgotten in the grass. A sheet of lightning made an exposure of the scene—Mrs. Seaton, fully clothed, the others in dressing gowns, all wearing the dead, popeyed expression of diners caught by a photographer's magnesium flash.

"Christ! It's the head!" exclaimed Rennell Torrance. "In a string bag. It's—"

"Don't panic, Father!" came Mara's cool, contemptuous voice. "It's my head of Robert. And please don't kick it around," she added, as Nigel's electric torch was switched on to reveal Rennell Torrance gingerly turning over the head with his foot.

"Panic? What d'you mean? Don't talk to me like that, you little bitch!" said her father shockingly.

"We all seem to have heads on the brain," said Lionel. "What's it doing out here, anyway? This place is turning into a madhouse."

"I think it's just going to rain." Janet Seaton was in control again. "We'd better all go to bed. Mr. Strangeways, d'you feel well enough to walk in?"

Nigel groaned, in what he hoped was a convincing manner, half-rose to his feet, and collapsed again.

"I'm sorry. I—"

"Lionel, you help him. And Rennell, please. We can't have him getting wet after the shock. Mara, run along to bed now."

"No," said Nigel. "We've got to find Finny first."

"That's all right," said Robert Seaton, who had just come out of the house. "The superintendent will be over here in a few minutes."

"The superintendent?" said Janet. "But—. I said, go to bed, Mara! And do button up that dressing gown. It's positively indecent!" Her voice seemed full of a suppressed rage.

"Here's Mr. Strangeways been half strangled, and Janet has eyes for nothing but my bosom," retorted the girl, with an edgy laugh.

"I do really think you'd better come in, Mr. Strangeways," said Janet. "You see, I put a little sedative in your brandy. You ought to have a good sleep. The police will look after things now."

"I must just have a word with Blount before I pop off, though."

And Nigel did, in private, a few minutes later. The superintendent had driven over, with his detective sergeant, from the Hinton Lacey pub where he was staying.

"Look, Blount, I'm supposed to have swallowed a sleeping draught, so

I'd better go to sleep. Anyway, I've just been strangled, and that takes it out of one. Did Bob Seaton tell you what happened?"

Blount nodded.

"Well, I want you to do two things. I'll explain tomorrow, when I wake up. Put Sergeant Bower under that chestnut tree and tell him not to stir an inch from it, not if it's struck by lightning. And to let no one else near. I may be wrong, but—. The second thing is, if Finny Black is found, don't let him come back into the house."

"Will he be dangerous still?"

"He might be. But he might also be *in danger* here."

The admirable Blount, perceiving by the frayed thread of a voice in which Nigel spoke that he was almost exhausted, asked no more questions but promised to do what Nigel had suggested.

"One other thing. Bob Seaton is the only person who has any control over Finny in his present condition," whispered Nigel. "If you *do* start Inspector Gates on a man hunt, I'd recommend sending Seaton with them."

"Oh, Seaton's gone out after him already. With his son."

Nigel shrugged his shoulders. It would have to look after itself. He allowed Blount to support him upstairs and help him undress. Hardly had the bedroom door closed again when Nigel was sound asleep. . . .

The next morning Nigel was wakened by the sound of his door opening. Vanessa's mop of tawny hair slid into view.

"Janet wants to know what you'd like for breakfast. I say, have you got mumps?"

Nigel's hand moved involuntarily to his throat, which was tender enough indeed, and felt the towel still swathed round it.

"Oh, this? No." His voice began as a painful croak. "I was a bit too sharp, and I cut myself."

"Cut your throat?" Vanessa's eyes opened wide. Nigel perceived she had an exceedingly literal mind. He said,

"I was speaking metaphorically."

"Oh, I see," replied Vanessa, with the informed air of a member of a household where metaphor was quite the legitimate thing. "There are two kinds of cereal, eggs, coffee or tea."

"I'd like coffee and a boiled egg."

"O.K." Vanessa teetered round the door, looking mysterious. "I shall bring it up myself. The household is thoroughly disorganized. Guess what has happened?"

"The cook was struck by lightning last night."

"No. Finny has disappeared. *And* there's a man under our big chestnut tree. I took him out some tea and toast."

"Good—I mean, I'm sorry to hear about Finny."

"I'm not. Of course, it's very inconvenient, with servants so difficult to get nowadays. But Finny *is* rather gruesome. And besides—can you keep a secret?" asked Vanessa, who obviously could not. "Well, he *stole* sometimes."

"That's what you were hinting at last night? The kleptomaniac?"

"Mm. He can't help it, Daddy says. And of course we generally find the things again. He has caches, like a magpie."

"What, in the house?"

"In the garden or the orchard generally. But further away sometimes. We found the last one in Foxhole Wood. Lionel followed him there. He'd taken three of my china dogs, and Li saw him hide them in a bush. The funny thing, talking of magpies, is that just beside the bush there was one of those gamekeeper's gallows things, with dead magpies and rooks and jays and squirrels hung from it. I think it's very crool, don't you? Oh Lor'! There's Janet calling. Coffee and a boiled egg, you said, didn't you?"

When Vanessa returned with the breakfast tray, she announced,

"Superintendent Blount, of New Scotland Yard, is here to see you."

"Ask him to come up. What are you doing this morning, Vanessa?"

"I shall go for a long ride on Kitty after I've helped with the housework. I find I can think best on horseback."

"What are you going to think about?"

"Oh, I can't tell that till I start thinking, can I? But Lieutenant says that Beautiful Thoughts are essential to a Rich and Fully Satisfying Life. So I'm practicing hard this hols. Good-by."

Nigel was gingerly swallowing his egg when Blount came in.

"How are you feeling this morning, Strangeways?"

"Fine, thanks. Tell me, Blount, do you ever have beautiful thoughts?"

"E'eh, well now—"

"I was afraid not. Perhaps if you'd joined the mounted police, it might have been different."

The superintendent stared at him with some anxiety. "Are you sure you feel quite the thing? No pains in the head?"

"Quite sure. Any sign of Finny Black yet?"

"No. Gates has it in hand. He'll not be long at large, not a wee dwarf like him. Too conspicuous. Now, tell me—?"

"What's your form at tree climbing, Blount?"

"I was pretty handy at it as a bairn," replied the superintendent, with the overbright air of one humoring a lunatic.

"Because someone has got to swarm up that chestnut tree. I suppose nobody's tried to entice your sergeant away from it?"

"No. Everything's been very quiet. Bower can climb the tree. He's a younger man, and it'll be a change from standing under it. What's in your mind, Strangeways?"

Nigel took another cautious swallow of coffee. Then, ticking the points off on his fingers, he said,

"First: Finny Black is apt to go haywire in thunderstorms; there was a thunderstorm the night of the murder, another one last night. Second: when I was staying here in June, Robert Seaton said that Finny would copy any act he had seen done. Third: Finny is a kleptomaniac; he had a cache in Foxhole Wood, near one of those gamekeeper's gallows with vermin swinging from it. Fourth: last night Finny pinches a clay head of Robert Seaton, executed by Miss Torrance, puts it in a string bag—notice the string bag particularly—and swarms up the chestnut tree with it."

"A string bag," remarked Blount, his eyes sparkling now with sagacity, "because that would be the simplest way of suspending a clay head from a branch, like he'd seen the vermin suspended from the gamekeeper's gallows?"

"You're really very good indeed, Blount," said Nigel warmly.

"And—e'eh—you're suggesting that there might be—e'eh—other acts the wee dwarf would imitate, when the thunder had turned his brain?"

"Exactly. He might copy something he'd seen done under similar conditions, *or* repeat some action of his own."

"It seems to me the sooner Bower gets up that tree, the better."

"Wait till Vanessa Seaton has left the house. She's going out for a ride soon. We don't want her about the place. It might interfere with her Beautiful Thoughts curriculum."

"And what about the others?"

"It might be helpful if they were present, including the Torrances. Can you think up some pretext for getting them all out there? Of course, it may be an entirely false alarm. It's quite a long shot after all. But there've been other pointers. Tell you about them when Bower has done his stuff."

The village church clock had just struck eleven when they assembled round the chestnut tree. As he strolled out of the house with Robert Seaton, Nigel noticed Janet in earnest colloquy with the superintendent: she glanced up at the tree, and whatever she was saying, it evidently took Blount considerably aback.

"I hope he's not going to keep us long," said Robert Seaton. "I want to get back to my work."

But Blount did not hurry the proceedings. He took Sergeant Bower aside for a whispered conversation. Then he asked for a ladder, and there was a further delay while Lionel Seaton found the gardener and the gardener fetched the ladder. If Blount's object was to strain the nerves of the little party at the foot of the giant tree, he was not unsuccessful. They stood about, fidgeting, finding little or nothing to say to one another—why should they, after living so close together all these years? Or they might have been strangers, met for the first time, with the ice still to break. To Nigel, standing apart, it was as if he observed the members of a house party gathered for a photograph, kicking their heels, making self-conscious jokes and desultory conversation, half excited, half resentful while the host fusses with his camera, each of them preoccupied with his own ego, with an intention not to be caught out by the camera, to put his best face forward.

In the fresh, robust light of this August morning, the air cleared by the thunderstorm overnight, the courtyard grass sparkling with rain, the five of them stilled into their final poses as the gardener approached with his ladder. Janet Seaton, planted bulkily there, arms folded, frowning, now moved a little closer to her husband, as if to protect or to receive protection. The poet, who had been standing with his hands behind his back, an abstracted look in his eyes, took his wife's arm—a natural, homely gesture. The sun shone upon Lionel's golden head and Mara Torrance's dark one, close together: the girl's face was a grayish-white, the color of newspaper left out in the rain; the sunlight cruelly emphasized its haggard look. Lionel muttered something to her, and she glanced up at him with an expression of gratitude which made her seem younger, less raffish and defiant. A few yards away, Rennell Torrance fished in his pocket, pulled out pipe and pouch. His eyes, one might have thought, were studiously avoiding the rest of the group, the two policemen, the gardener, and the tree itself. His hand shook as he lit the pipe. He glanced at Nigel through the smoke, his heavy lower lip pouting; glanced, rather theatrically, at his wrist watch, shrugged his shoulders and shifted his feet.

Lionel Seaton stepped forward to help the gardener with the ladder. He was self-composed, alert, interested.

There was another pause, while Blount conferred again with his detective sergeant.

"Are we going to be kept here all the morning?" Rennell Torrance grumpily inquired of no one in particular.

"Will you all step back a little?" said Blount smoothly, heightening the illusion that a house party was about to be photographed.

Plash Meadow watched the scene with all its windows, holding itself calmly aloof, as a house well might which had seen two hundred years of good and evil.

At last Sergeant Bower advanced to the ladder, climbed steadily up and disappeared into the thick foliage. Mara Torrance was heard to inquire, in her most irritatingly casual voice, "Have we been summoned out here to watch a bobby climb a tree?"

"I shall explain presently," said Blount. "It's a little experiment of mine." His tone was paternal. His eyes sleepily scrutinized them all, standing where he had put them, outside the shade of the tree, the sun spotlighting their faces.

A hoarse shout came from halfway up the tree. Then a louder rustling, as the detective sergeant climbed faster to his now visible objective.

"Now don't worry, dear," said Robert Seaton to his wife. "He's quite safe. It's a very sound old tree."

"But he's going so high up."

They might have been discussing the exploit of an eight-year-old son.

"I've got it, sir!" called the sergeant from high overhead. There were grunting noises as he started to descend. Then suddenly a muffled "Damn!" and a louder "Look out, below!" Something was falling through the leaves, scraping and sliding down from branch to branch. Mara gave a little scream. Robert Seaton's arm tightened on his wife's. The next moment, like a swollen, giant chestnut, a roundish object dropped from the lowest foliage, bounced upon the grass, and rolled to the feet of Rennell Torrance.

"Clumsy ass!" growled the superintendent.

Torrance glared down on the object at his feet. His pipe fell out of his mouth. He began to tremble all over; his hands made little blind fending movements in front of him: then he ran a few paces away and was violently sick.

"Wh-what is it?" cried Mara.

The superintendent strode over to the object on the grass, picked it up by its hair and dangled it before them—the severed and decomposing head of a man.

"Does anyone recognize this?" he asked in the matter-of-fact tones of a clerk at a Lost Property Office.

There was another moment of stunned silence. Then Lionel Seaton coolly said, "Well, it's not very well preserved, of course, but it has quite a look of you, Father."

"No! It hasn't, it hasn't, it hasn't, it hasn't!" Mara Torrance's voice rose to a long, rasping scream. Mrs. Seaton advanced upon the girl, slapped her face very hard two or three times. Mara's screaming was cut off suddenly. Janet took the girl, sobbing now, awkwardly into her arms.

The poet went up close to Superintendent Blount. "It's incredible!" he murmured.

"What's incredible, sir?"

"That's my brother. My brother Oswald."

"But he's dead, Father," said Lionel. "I mean—"

"He's dead now, anyway."

The voice of Sergeant Bower broke in. "Very sorry, sir. The net slipped out of my hand. It got caught on a branch and the head rolled out of it before I could—"

"Never mind, Bower. It was damaged enough already." And Blount gazed meditatively at the face, hideous with putrescence, wormholed by the beaks of birds, a dirty rag of flesh—all that remained of the neck—hanging away from the underjaw on the left-hand side where there were still the clear signs of a long, incised wound running from the left ear to just below the point of the chin.

The superintendent turned to Robert Seaton again. "I wonder could I trouble you for some brown paper, and the loan of a hatbox, if you have such a thing."

Chapter 7

Janet Seaton Confesses

"So there's another possible reason for cutting off the head," said Nigel.

"To conceal the way he was killed? Mphm. Don't see how it helps us, though."

"Narrows down the search for a weapon," Nigel suggested.

"Any sharp instrument could have done it. The wound won't tell us much, I reckon, after all this time."

"Perhaps not. But, once the murderer had made a wound like that, you'd expect him to cut through it, not below it, when he was taking the head off. I suppose you've been into the razor question?"

"Yes, Mr. Seaton and his son use safety razors. Finny Black doesn't have to shave. Mr. Torrance has a cutthroat razor," said Blount.

"He has, has he?"

"Yes, but any sharp blade could have done it. A carving knife."

"Surely not, Blount? All the indications are that Oswald Seaton would be very much on his guard when he returned here. He'd expect a whetted knife, rather than a fatted calf."

The two men were talking in Superintendent Blount's bedroom at the Hinton Lacey pub. It was late on the same day that the head had been found. Nigel continued,

"Oswald returned to Plash Meadow in a highly furtive way. We're agreed on that?"

"Uh-huh."

"Now, this fake suicide of his, ten years ago. The police had nothing against him. There was no question of a criminal charge, which he'd flee the country to escape?"

"No."

"But he did, presumably, leave England. And he certainly staged a very convincing suicide. But, by all accounts—the editor of the *Redcote Gazette* would certainly bear this out—Oswald was not the sort of chap who'd give up his money, his position and everything, except under extreme pressure. He was a rat. He'd wriggle out of anything, Mr. Keeley said. And if he was cornered, he'd fight."

"Verra like. But what's this to do with the weapon that killed him?"

"I'm working along to that. I suggest there's only one thing which could have made Oswald fake a suicide and leave the country—he'd committed a crime, some very grave crime, which had not come to the ears of the police. I suggest that more than one person knew about this crime. If it had been one person only, Oswald would have done his best to silence him. But even he would hardly dare to try to bump off four people."

"Why d'you say four?"

"Because I've reasons for thinking that there were four people who knew something very much to Oswald's discredit. But let's skip that for the present. I suggest pressure was brought to bear upon him by one or more of these people. Either you leave the country, or we expose you to the police."

"Blackmail, eh? But why didn't he just leave the country, then? Why the fake suicide? You mean the suicide was part of the bargain, part of the price he'd got to pay for silence?"

"Exactly."

"And who profited from Oswald's apparent death?" Blount pursued. "His brother."

"His brother. And Janet Seaton. And indirectly the Torrances."

"His brother chiefly. Well, then?"

"Well, something happens which suggests to Oswald that it may be relatively safe for him to come back to England. Or perhaps it's just that he's on his beam-ends and desperate."

"Wait a minute, now. That's vairy problematic and vague."

"Not entirely. I noticed in the Torrances' studio, a copy of a society paper with a picture of the Seatons and Torrances outside Plash Meadow and a caption saying the Torrances lived here. The paper was a year old. You know the way back numbers of English papers are found lying about abroad—in bars, or hotels, or waiting rooms. I think it possible that Oswald may have seen this particular magazine, and—"

"But why should a picture of this group at Plash Meadow give him the all-clear to come back to England? You're implying that, because the Seatons and the Torrances were living together now, the danger to Oswald—the danger of his secret being exposed—was gone. It doesn't make sense to me."

"Not gone, necessarily. But diminished enough for him to take the risk of returning. I can't explain this side of it further till I've had another talk with Mara Torrance. Call it a hypothesis. What follows? Oswald works his passage back to England. He lands at Bristol, say, and lies up there. It may be that he communicates with someone at Plash Meadow, to take soundings. He is not confident at all of the reception he will get. He turns up here, by night, in the most unobtrusive way possible. He's obviously going to be suspicious, on his guard still. That brings me back to the weapon. Can you imagine Oswald Seaton allowing anyone at Plash Meadow near him with a carving knife. You can't conceal a carving knife at all comfortably on your person. A razor, or a whetted clasp knife, you can."

"But it's exposure, not murder, he'd be apprehensive about?"

"I agree. But, when you're nervous, you're nervous of everything. Think of the setup. He arrives here at night. Someone meets him, either by appointment or by accident, we can't tell which. Now, unless Gates and his men are absolute fools, the murder was not done in the house. There'd have been a hell of a lot of blood."

"You can take it from me it wasn't. No stains anywhere. No clothing, carpets or rugs hidden or sent away to be cleaned."

"Then it was done outside the house. Where? In the garden or the orchard? Possible. But the murderer couldn't rely on all traces of blood being washed away by the thundershowers; and Gates would almost certainly have found some. The outbuildings? Worse still. But the dairy: that could have been sluiced down under cover of the noise of a thundershower. How could the murderer get Oswald into the dairy? By playing on his fears of exposure. Just hide in here, old man, for a few hours, till we've thought out the position and what we're going to do next. But I don't see Oswald trusting this person enough not to keep a wary eye on him. Or her. A carving knife negligently carried in the hand would disquiet him, I fancy."

"All right. I give up the carving knife. But your whole hypothesis breaks down on motive. If everyone at Plash Meadow knew Oswald's secret—"

"Not everyone, necessarily. Mr. and Mrs. Seaton, I suggest, and Rennell, and Mara Torrance."

"—Why should Oswald have to be murdered? He could be made to disappear again by a threat of exposure."

"If his secret was that he'd done someone here a grievous wrong, there'd be a revenge motive. Let us imagine that, of the Plash Meadow households, A. was prepared to forgive and forget, and had encouraged Oswald to return: but Oswald is intercepted by B., the one he'd originally wronged, who still nourishes an inveterate hatred of him."

"Och, these A.'s and B.'s!—it's all too much in the air. Where does Finny Black come in, anyway?"

Nigel drew meditatively on his cigarette. "Do *you* think Finny did it?"

"There's no evidence."

"The head in the tree?"

"Anyone could have put it there."

"Anyone active enough to climb the tree," said Nigel. "He wouldn't risk bringing out a ladder for the purpose."

"I'll tell you what I think about Finny Black." Blount leaned forward in his chair. "First, he had no motive we know of. Second, although he got queer in thunderstorms, there's no record that his queerness ran to violence. Third, if it did, it would be crazy violence—he'd not think about covering his traces; he'd not take his victim into the dairy, and Oswald wouldn't meekly follow him there either."

"Agreed. So—?"

"So, if it wasn't the murderer himself who disposed of the head—and why should he choose such a—e'eh—such a farfetched place to put it?—then the only possible explanation is that Finny Black saw the murder done, or maybe just came upon the head while the murderer was away disposing of the body, and ran off with it up the tree."

"Having, by a strange coincidence, a net bag with him to put it in?"

"The murderer might have fetched that already, so that he could convey the head away without getting blood on his clothes," said Blount. "It'd be natural for him to get rid of the body first, because it was the more difficult to conceal. He'd not dare leave it lying about in the dairy: but he could hide the head there temporarily without much danger."

"I'm afraid you're right," said Nigel. "And, of course, if Finny *saw* the murder—"

"Aye, the poor crazed loon maybe did well to run away."

"Not that he'd be much use as a witness. He *is* dumb, isn't he?"

"Yes, I've been into that. But he's not a cretin. He could understand questions and he can write a bit." The superintendent sighed heavily. "This is a most unsatisfactory case, though. Here's a house, at the back end of nowhere. The old cook is hard of hearing; apparently she slept right through the thunderstorm that night. Finny Black is dumb. There's a village girl who comes in to clean every day; but she noticed nothing wrong the next morning. Gates and I have been right through the village: but, apart from the chap who saw Mr. Seaton returning from his walk, not a soul has one single piece of evidence to contribute. The press, as you know, has publicized our request for anyone to come forward who was on or near the river that night, in the vicinity of the footbridge. Results entirely negative."

"It looks as if you'll have to do all your own work for once, instead of getting the great British public to do it for you."

Blount brushed this aside with a curt gesture. "And the whole thing is cold, anyway. The body was not discovered till three days after the murder, and it wasn't till we found the head this morning, a week after *that,* that we could begin to pin the thing down to Plash Meadow."

"Too bad. What are your plans?"

The superintendent outlined them. The investigation would now become three pronged. With the aid of old photographs borrowed from Robert Seaton, and photographs of the severed head, it was hoped that a composite picture could be produced to give a fair likeness of Oswald Seaton. This picture would be reproduced in the press, carrying the usual appeal for anyone who had seen this man recently to come forward. Provided with copies of it, Inspector Gates would try to trace the traveler's journey down to Ferry Lacey. Copies would go to airports and seaports; shipping companies and air lines would be asked for co-operation in tracing the original: and the Bristol police would be requested to inquire at all lodginghouses and hotels, since the scanty evidence still seemed to point at Bristol as the most likely link between Oswald Seaton's sojourn abroad and his arrival at Ferry Lacey.

Secondly (and here the superintendent groaned) the whole business of Oswald Seaton's "suicide" would have to be reopened. Blount had already applied to his assistant commissioner for a detective inspector of the C.I.D., a pertinacious subordinate of his, named Slingsby, to be detailed for this work. "If Slingsby can't root it up, nobody can," he told Nigel. It was obviously essential to examine this "suicide" again now, although at the time both the police and the probate court had been satisfied: all the more so, if Nigel's hypothesis was correct that it had been staged under pressure from one or more of the parties who had benefited by it.

The third prong of the inquiry would, of course, be directed at Plash Meadow. Here, Blount was on much more difficult ground, at any rate until Finny Black was found. He had already interviewed every member of the two households. Mara Torrance, questioned again, had admitted she might have been wrong about the time when she'd seen Mr. and Mrs. Seaton cross the courtyard: she had not looked at her watch, it seemed, but had thought it was not long after she'd heard the church clock strike half-past twelve; but she agreed now that it might have been quarter-to-one which she'd heard striking.

As for the others, their stories appeared to be unassailable. It could be argued that it was rather odd for the Seatons not to have seen or heard anything suspicious that night. They had been out of the house twice, they said: once to have a look at the mare, Kitty; then, about half an hour later, when they discovered that Finny Black was not in his bedroom, to look for him. Each time, they agreed, they had passed near the dairy: but they had not gone inside even during their search for Finny. Still, there was no inherent contradiction in their story. Oswald Seaton might well have wished to avoid them; he might even, conceivably, have been dead before they came out of the house the first time; alternatively, he might not have been killed till after they had returned from their search for Finny: this search, they said, had occupied them five to ten minutes—they'd broken it off when the second and heavier thundershower came down. The dairy was normally locked up by the dairyman, after the evening milking: this man believed he had locked it on the fatal night, but could not absolutely swear to this. The front door of Plash Meadow was also locked, but on that particular night Robert Seaton had not, to the best of his recollection, locked the door leading to the courtyard at the back, either on returning from his walk or when he and Janet had come in after looking for Finny.

"There's one thing I'd like to know," said Nigel at this point of the superintendent's résumé. "Why did Janet Seaton start worrying about her mare during the first thunderstorm, but not about Finny Black till the second one began?"

"It had occurred to me too," said Blount dryly. "But she explained it quite reasonably. She says that, when the first thunderstorm began, she went along to Finny's bedroom to see if he was all right. She found him asleep. That was soon after midnight. She decided to sit up then till her husband came back from his walk: she expected him back sooner, she says. When he did return, he told her he'd heard the mare kicking about uneasily in its loose box. So she went out with him to soothe the animal down. By this time, both of them felt wakeful, so they decided not to go to bed till the storm was over. They sat up in Mrs. Seaton's boudoir, reading. After about half an hour, they decided they would go to bed. Just then the second thunderstorm broke, so Mrs. Seaton thought she'd just have another look at Finny first. This time, he wasn't in his room. So they went out and hunted for him. When they returned, unsuccessful, they did go to bed at last—they have separate rooms, as you know—and fell asleep quickly, both of them."

"They're a very protective family," remarked Nigel as he rose to go. Blount had offered to drive him back, but Nigel preferred to clear his head by a walk through the night air.

"The question is, whom are they protecting?" said Blount.

"Oh, everyone is protecting everyone else. Robert Seaton gets it all round: he's the most precious object in the whole collection. Lionel is madly protective toward Vanessa. Finny Black's aberrations call forth extreme solicitude on the part of Robert and Janet. Then there's Mara Torrance—Robert treats her as if she were his own daughter; Lionel is far from indifferent to her, in his quiet way; Janet tolerates her, which is saying a good deal: they've all woven a veil of silence round young Mara. No, Blount—the question is not *whom* are they protecting, but *from what.* We mustn't be misled into thinking that they're all in a conspiracy to cherish a murderer. They may be. But I fancy we shall have to get through several protective layers, which may have little relevance to this crime, before we come to *him.*"

And I myself, thought Nigel, walking briskly back to Ferry Lacey, have enlisted in the bodyguard. His own status at Plash Meadow, after the discovery of the head, might have seemed highly questionable. He had, after all, been spying on Janet Seaton the previous night. And indeed it was part of the gathering mystery that a character so fierce and autocratic as Janet should have accepted his share in the night's work without protest or apparent rancor: apart, of course, from virtually setting Finny at his throat; but that might have been no more than the reflex action of a suddenly startled woman. At any rate, Nigel had restored himself to her good graces this afternoon by dealing with the swarm of reporters who had descended again upon Plash Meadow as promptly as if the fall of Oswald Seaton's head had been audible for fifty miles around the chestnut tree.

So here I am, reflected Nigel, at once a member of the bodyguard and a nigger in the woodpile. Though God knows what the nigger is supposed to be doing in the woodpile. Do I want to discover the murderer? From all one knows of Oswald Seaton, his taking-off was a consummation devoutly to be wished. What I really want is that Robert Seaton should be allowed to write his poetry. In fact, I'm already sucked into the general conspiracy to cherish and protect his genius. Well, why not?

An owl hooted rudely from a tree at the roadside.

"You disagree?" Nigel addressed the unseen skeptic. "You're telling me that Robert Seaton's genius is the one thing at Plash Meadow which can safely be left to look after itself? Maybe. But there's one little commodity genius cannot manufacture for itself, or do without. Time."

"Hoo! Hoo! . . . Hoo! Hoo!" exclaimed the owl.

"Ah, who indeed? Well, tomorrow I shall unwrap the first layer of the mystery. . . ."

At half after eleven the following morning, Nigel went into Janet Seaton's sitting room. The house was silent. Robert had been distrait at breakfast, and retired to his room immediately afterward, an intent look upon his face as though his powers were all concentrated on the delicate, invisible thread of poetry to be drawn, unbroken, out of the inner darkness where he had laid it down the day before. Lionel and Vanessa had gone off to the river. In the little garden-close beside the old tithe barn, Mara Torrance was sun bathing: her father, sprawled in a deck chair, read the newspapers.

"May I have a talk with you?" asked Nigel.

Mrs. Seaton looked up from her accounts. "Of course. I was rather hoping—I feel I owe you an apology. Have they heard anything about Finny yet?"

"I'm afraid not."

"I can't understand it. He's never stayed away so long before. Mr. Seaton and I are getting anxious about it. I didn't like to say anything at breakfast, in front of Vanessa."

Nigel was struck, not for the first time, by the incongruity between Mrs. Seaton's appearance and her address. It was as though a hard-bitten hunting woman spoke in the ceremonious periods of a Jane Austen dowager.

"I'm afraid I rather lost my head the night before last," she pursued.

Lost yours and found another's, thought Nigel. He said,

"It's I who should apologize. I must have startled you badly, coming out of the darkness like that. I've a regrettable tendency toward melodrama, and have never quite succeeded in breaking myself of it."

Janet Seaton made an abrupt gesture with her heavy-knuckled hands, as if to push aside such a flippancy.

"You knew the—the other head was there, up in the tree?" she asked.

"It must have seemed as if I was spying on you. But I happened to see Finny start across the courtyard. I was looking out of the window—"

"Looking out? But your window's—"

"Not out of *my* window. When the storm began, I went into the room opposite—the room where you generally put guests, Vanessa told me—because the storm was approaching from that side of the house, and I wanted to watch it."

From beneath her heavy eyebrows, knitted in a frown, Janet Seaton gave him a somewhat formidable look.

"You haven't answered my question yet, Mr. Strangeways."

"Well, I did suspect the other head might be up there, yes." Nigel paused, his pale blue eyes fixed inquiringly upon her. "So did you, I fancy?"

"I? Really, Mr. Strangeways!"

"In fact, you as good as told me so. Not intentionally, of course."

The painful flush came over Janet Seaton's face, darkening its sallow skin. She rose abruptly from her desk, went over to the window seat and plumped herself down on it, face averted.

"I think you had better explain yourself."

"Do you mind if I smoke? . . . It began with the clay head of your husband. I was told that you had provoked Mara Torrance into doing it."

"You were told? By whom?"

"I gathered it was so," Nigel went on patiently, scrutinizing the stiff, bulky figure outlined against the window. "I gathered that you had thrown doubts on Mara's ability to do a straightforward, realistic portrait head. You made a violent attack upon the abstract, nonrepresentational school. So her father told me, at any rate. Yet, at tea the other day, you showed considerable knowledge of this school, and sympathy for it. Naturally this suggested to me that your previous attack on it had not been quite ingenuous. Just a minute," said Nigel as Mrs. Seaton made an impatient movement, "let me go on. I'm simply explaining how I reasoned. If you had no *arrière pensée,* if you just wanted Mara to do a head of your husband, it was surely a roundabout way to get it. Why not have asked her straight out? And then this clay head, obtained in a rather devious manner, is exhibited on the tea table, in full view of Finny Black, on a thundery afternoon when he is already showing the signs of mild dementia which such weather brings on him."

Janet Seaton's heavy head made a little, weaving movement from side to side, like that of a fly-tormented heifer. Nigel felt a stir of pity for her: but his curiosity was stronger, and he went on,

"It occurred to me that the whole thing might be a contrivance on your part to get Finny to lead you to the head of the murdered man. You suspected, at any rate, that he might have hidden it. And, if he had done so on the night of the murder, he might repeat the action again with the —with a make-believe head."

"I think I know what you're going to ask me," came in a numb voice from the woman at the window. A crucial question was indeed on the tip of Nigel's tongue: but he decided not to put it yet. Instead, he asked,

"Wasn't that what you had in mind? And the reason why I was not put in the usual guest room?"

"You're very intelligent, Mr. Strangeways." Janet Seaton turned to him. She was unable to conceal a look of relief, of reprieve almost. Her fingers unlocked themselves on her lap. "You're quite a dangerous guest to have in the house, you know," she added with an attempt at archness.

"So there we were," Nigel pursued. "A thundery night. The decoy head in position, so to speak. Finny getting worked up. The dangerous guest tucked safely away on the other side of the house—and, by the way, I couldn't help noticing you were on edge that evening, and relieved when I went up to bed. Yes, I have to confess that I didn't go into the other room just to watch the storm. Presently you came out and stood at the door giving on to the courtyard. And then Finny, who'd presumably fetched the clay head from your husband's study and taken it to his bedroom, emerged from the servants' quarters. You were on the watch, and followed him out to the chestnut tree. And I followed you. A shocking abuse of hospitality, I fear."

Janet Seaton smiled at him uncertainly. "And I lost my head, and as good as got you strangled by poor Finny. A shocking abuse of my position as your hostess. May I have one of your cigarettes?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry." Nigel lit it for her, noticing how her hands still trembled. "Did you suspect Finny had done the murder? Or did you think he'd just come upon the severed head by accident, and hidden it?"

There was a marked pause before Janet Seaton spoke. "I'd no idea, one way or the other. There was no evidence then, you remember, that the—that it had been done here at all. Or who the victim was," she said slowly. "All I knew was that the head had disappeared. And that Finny is apt to take things, and to behave rather strangely during thunderstorms. Somehow the two things got linked together in my mind. So I made the experiment."

"I see. Did your husband know what you were up to?"

A momentary look of hauteur came into Mrs. Seaton's face, induced no doubt by Nigel's rather disrespectful mode of referring to her "experiment."

"He knew what was in my mind."

"And approved what you were doing?"

"But of course." Her rising intonation suggested that she was not accustomed to solicit Robert's approval for her conduct. The Lacey blood was very much in the ascendant again.

"What I can't understand," remarked Nigel mildly, "is why you went to such extraordinary lengths to protect Finny Black."

"To *protect* Finny?"

"Yes. The whole procedure, from the purveyance of the clay head onward, was so much under cover. If you'd merely thought Finny might have had some connection with the murder, with the missing head, why not have suggested that experiment to the police, or to me?"

"But I had no proof." Mrs. Seaton sounded a bit flustered. Then she recovered herself and said in her stateliest manner, "It is surely quite natural to look after the interests of one's dependents. We Laceys have always prided ourselves on—"

"Oh come, Mrs. Seaton, that really won't do at all," exclaimed Nigel, who could be formidable too on occasion. "You are a woman of very considerable intellectual powers. You couldn't have failed to realize what construction the police would place upon your behavior."

"My behavior? I don't understand you," she said icily.

"Your keeping it all so dark. Let me tell you, then, what the police will say. They'll say that it was quite inconceivable for you to have done all this in the interests of a dependent—and a half-wit dwarf at that." Janet Seaton visibly flinched. "They'll say that your actions can only be interpreted in one way," Nigel went on, "and that your secrecy can only be accounted for in one way. You, or someone you love, killed Oswald Seaton. The head was removed to prevent identification of the victim. Finny Black stole the head and hid it, in the temporary absence of the murderer, perhaps while he was putting the body into the river. You, or the murderer, know that there's no safety until the head is disposed of. You suspect Finny may have got it. You dare not ask him openly to produce it for you, because that would give you away. So you work out an elaborate and secret method by which Finny may lead you to the head without himself or anyone else knowing what's afoot. Would anyone lay herself open to such obvious and appalling suspicions, the police will ask, on behalf of a—"

"Stop!" Janet Seaton almost shrieked it. Her fingers writhed and clenched in her lap as she fought for command of herself. Her face was turned away again. Presently she said,

"Have you ever wondered why Robert and I had no children of our own?"

Nigel shook his head uncomprehendingly. Janet Seaton's eyes glanced all round her exquisite room, as if seeking strength or comfort in its familiar beauties, or as if seeing them now for the first time, or the last—the highlights on the rosewood and walnut furniture, the hand-painted Bristol glass bowls on the mantelshelf, the little Constable glowing like a gem above it—all the symbols and supports of an elegant, rich, distinguished life.

"You say one would only have done—done what I did—the secrecy, the—the calculation of it all—for somebody one loves?"

Nigel nodded.

"You wonder why I should do so much to protect poor Finny?"

Nigel nodded again. He could hardly have spoken a word, so breathless had the atmosphere become in the square, shining room. Janet Seaton's voice was a harsh whisper.

"Finny is my child," she said.

Chapter 8

Rennell Torrance Reveals

"Mrs. Seaton's child! Oh well now. Extraordinary. Could you believe it! Inexperienced girl, no doubt. Unfortunate lapse. Best-regulated families. Most disconcerting. Oh well now, what next, I wonder."

Superintendent Blount, as was his way when events sprang a surprise upon him, fell into the idiom of Mr. Jingle, and repeatedly patted the dome of his bald head.

Nigel, who felt a dim atavistic unease at discussing the case with Blount under his host's roof, had compromised with the summerhouse. They were sitting there in deck chairs, facing the garden and the old tithe barn.

"I'll leave you to elicit the details from Mrs. Seaton," said Nigel.

The Superintendent looked unhappier still. "I suppose I shall have to. Vairy distasteful. Oh dear me," he complained, unprofessionally. "And it doesn't help us at all. Unless the puir wee dwarf did it. I suppose she's afraid he did? Is that all she told you about—e'eh—her relationship to him?"

Janet Seaton, in a stony, broken voice, had gone on to tell Nigel that Finny's father was a cousin of hers, later killed in the First World War. She had been seduced by him at the age of eighteen. She had gone down to a lonely cottage outside a village in Dorset, where she was unknown to anyone but her old nurse, who lived there. When the child was born and its abnormality became painfully clear, she left it in the nurse's charge. The nurse herself had died ten years ago; and Robert Seaton, to whom she had confessed the episode before their marriage, said they must look after Finny. During their honeymoon, spent in a village some distance away, Robert had gone over, Janet not daring to show herself, and found Finny in a bad way, living from hand to mouth, persecuted by the village hobbledehoys. They had brought him back to Plash Meadow.

"So you understand why Robert—why I dared not have any children again," Janet had ended.

Nigel now passed on this information to Blount, who presently commented,

"I doubt it's strange she should take him back after all that time, and get fond of him. You'd think it was the last thing a proud woman like her could bear—having him about the house."

"It was Robert's doing, chiefly, I presume. If it's true. With the two chief witnesses dead, you'll find it difficult to corroborate her story."

"But why should she make up such a humiliating story? Unless, of course—"

"Exactly," said Nigel. A shrewd look was exchanged between them.

"Well, we've found the head now. What about the clothes? Have your people checked up on the luggage Lionel Seaton took away that week end?" Nigel asked.

"He left here with one large suitcase. The gardener, who drove him to the station, confirms that. And he arrived with one large suitcase."

"Very helpful," said Nigel.

"I've been thinking about those clothes. Look here, Strangeways, supposing you've got a bloodstained suit on your hands, pair of boots, underwear, all the doings. And suppose you're too fly to bury them or put them in the river, or try and burn them, or send them to a cleaner's, what'd you do?"

Nigel gave the subject his attention for a minute. "Wrap 'em all up in a parcel and post them off to some total stranger," he answered.

"Too risky. Chances are the recipient of a bloodstained suit would take it to the police, and then there'd be the postmark to give you away."

"Post it from somewhere else, then."

"But none of the family except Lionel Seaton has left the neighborhood since the murder."

"Well, Lionel had a *big* suitcase, you say. And for a short week end too."

"That's true enough. But the recipient would still take them to the police. Or would he?" Blount paused expectantly in the manner of a schoolmaster prompting a brilliant pupil.

"I see what you're hinting at. A recipient who needed clothes so badly that he'd not make a fuss about a few bloodstains."

"Capital, capital!" The superintendent, vigorously massaging his head, beamed upon Nigel.

"A displaced person. Someone abroad. A German."

"Lionel Seaton was in the Army of Occupation in Germany for a short while."

"So he might have addressed the parcel to someone he knew out there?"

"Or handed it to one of the relief organizations. We've started inquiries on those lines. No results yet."

"If that turns out to be the explanation, Lionel is the murderer; or else he got rid of a parcel, in all good faith, handed to him by someone else. But, you know, there's a simpler solution," said Nigel slowly.

The superintendent cocked his head. "What's that?"

"Finny found a heap of clothes where he found the head, and took them off to another of his hiding places."

"I got Robert Seaton to take me round to all the old caches he knew of. We drew a blank."

"Damn it, Blount, you seem to think of everything. Still, it's not decisive. Finny might have made a new cache."

"That's what worries me. I wish we could find him. It'd no' be healthy for him, wandering about with that secret in his head."

"Surely you needn't worry now. The clothes were disposed of, presumably because they'd give a clue to the victim's identity: otherwise they'd have been deposited in the river with the body, or never taken off it. But once the head was found, there'd be no point in the murderer's killing Finny to keep the secret of the clothes."

"But the best part of a night elapsed between Finny's disappearance and the discovery of Oswald Seaton's head. And Robert Seaton and his son were out hunting for Finny some of that time. They started out together: then they parted company, Robert going over the grounds and the meadow out yonder, Lionel along the river bank. That's their story, anyway. Hello! There's Dolores looking for me."

The bearer of this exotic name was the village girl who came every morning to clean the house. Blount had evidently established good relations with her.

"Well, Dolores my lassie, so you can't keep away from me!" he exclaimed as the slatternly creature approached the summerhouse.

"Saucy! You're wanted on the telephone. Or shall I bring it out for you?"

The superintendent lumbered off toward the house, exchanging elephantine badinage with Dolores. Nigel lay back in the deck chair and closed his eyes. His mind played around the interview with Janet Seaton this morning; the confession which had told so much and explained so little: he kept recurring to the crucial question—the question which, as it happened, he had never asked her.

"That was Gates," said the superintendent when he returned. "He's found a witness at last who saw Oswald Seaton the night he was murdered. Farm laborer. Lives in a cottage about a mile out from Chillingham. Been on the booze, fell into a ditch and decided to stay there till he'd sobered up, his wife being a bit of a termagant. Incidentally, that's why he's not come forward till now—wife told him to have nothing to do with the police. Anyway, he saw a chap walking fast away from Chillingham. Shortish mackintosh, no hat, same height and general description as Oswald Seaton. Not much doubt it was he. Farm laborer didn't hail him. Surly chap. Looked at watch, though. Time was 11:15. So we can take it as fairly certain our man arrived on the 10:58 from Bristol. Which narrows down our search to Bristol and a few intermediate towns where that express stops."

"Was Oswald Seaton carrying any luggage?"

"Apparently not. Why?"

Nigel was frowning in concentration. "I wish you'd find out from the station check room at Chillingham Junction if they've any unclaimed articles left over from that night. A cheap suitcase possibly. Though why should he deposit it at the station? You see, if they haven't, it means that Oswald turned up here with nothing but what he could carry in his pockets—shaving tackle, toothbrush, etc."

"Just so. But—"

"Don't you see? That means he was expected. It means he knew somebody here would look after him, rig him out. And how could he know that, if this somebody hadn't been in communication with him? Judging by past history, he'd have had every reason, otherwise, to expect to be chucked out on his ear."

"You may be right," said the superintendent cautiously. "But why should anyone at Plash Meadow want Oswald back? I don't know the legal ins and outs of it; but when the original owner of a property, presumed dead, is found to be living, it'll likely make things vairy awkward for the present owners, to say the least of it."

"Even if they've still got the same hold over him which compelled him to disappear originally?"

"Aye, there's that, to be sure. But it was your own idea that something had happened—maybe his seeing that picture in the old society periodical—which gave Oswald the all-clear to come back to this country."

Nigel's eyes were fastened upon a spider hauling itself up its own thread in a slant of sunlight at the summerhouse door. "What it boils down to, Blount, is this," he said slowly. "Find someone here to whose advantage it would be for Oswald to return from the dead, *when he did,* which implies someone who knew he was alive, which probably means someone who was instrumental in Oswald's disappearance ten years ago, in the fake suicide, and—"

"And you've found the murderer?" asked Blount, with a quizzical glance at his friend.

"Oh dear me, no. You've eliminated one suspect. But you've also begun to crack the case open."

They talked for a few minutes longer. Then the superintendent rose to go. Nigel walked pensively toward the garden-close of the old tithe barn, where Rennell Torrance was asleep with a newspaper over his face. Mara had just gone indoors, Nigel noticed, presumably to prepare lunch. It seemed a good opportunity for a private talk with the painter.

Nigel shook him unceremoniously by the shoulder. Torrance grunted, heaved up in his chair. The paper slid off his face.

"Eh? What's that? Oh, it's you."

"Sorry to wake you up. But I've an urgent message for you from the superintendent. He wants to see you when he comes back this afternoon. About half-past two."

A flicker of apprehension came and went in the man's eyes.

"Wants to see me? What the devil for? I've told him everything I know about—"

"I doubt if you have," said Nigel cheerfully.

"Are you suggesting—?"

"You misunderstand me. In a police investigation, as new facts crop up, fresh questions arise. So the witnesses have to be interrogated again. Over and over again sometimes." Nigel gazed placidly at a feathery white cloud in the sky above Torrance's head. "Absolute terror, old Blount is, once he gets his teeth into a case. Probes away, you know, like a dentist with a drill."

"The metaphors are rather mixed," said Torrance, laughing wheezily, "but I see what you mean. Have a drink, old man."

Nigel took the gin and lime which Torrance handed him, and resumed his scrutiny of the cloud. A silence fell between them, which Nigel had no intention of breaking first. A bee hummed a light tenor against the distant bass of the weir.

"What's he after now?" said the painter at last. Nigel lowered his eyes, taking in the man's shabby, dissolute face, the pudgy hand which trembled as it raised the glass, the unconvincing air of impersonal interest.

"Blount? Oh, Oswald Seaton's past, of course. His supposed death. Who profited by it. Who stood to lose by his return. That sort of thing."

"He can't need me to tell him the answers."

Nigel spread out another silence, like bait. Torrance could not refrain from taking it, after a little.

"Well, I mean to say, of course nobody who knows Robert and Janet could imagine for a moment that they'd—but, as a purely academic point, it was they who profited by it. Robert did come in for the property. *And* he needed it."

"And they'd be highly embarrassed by Oswald's resurrection? It isn't really so academic, is it? And then there's yourself."

"Me? Don't be absurd, old man. I'd nothing to lose." The phrase touched a spring of self-pity in the painter. "I've not got a reputation, like Robert: or Janet's insane *amour propre.* I'm a failure, by the world's standards." He gave a creditable imitation of what novelists call a hollow laugh. "Not that I'd choose to be anything else. I've no use for these cheap successes. In the arts, success always corrupts. What matters is integrity. By that standard, my work is bound to survive—oh yes, in fifty years' time, when I'm safely under ground, the dealers will be putting their fancy prices on it. And—"

"And, in the meantime, you starve in your attic," said Nigel, gazing into his gin and lime.

The painter gave him a sulky look. "That's rather uncalled for. One can be starving for other things than food: for a bit of recognition, for instance. And no one likes living on another man's charity."

"Well, there's something you had to lose by Oswald's return. Or would he have allowed you to stay on in the old barn?" asked Nigel, bringing Torrance firmly back to the point. Equally firmly the painter grasped it. Raising his voice, he exclaimed:

"My good Lord! One doesn't do murder to maintain one's tenure of a charming piece of old-world brick and mortar. At least," he added, with a singular glint of malice in his eyes, "at least *I* wouldn't."

"Don't you be so sure, Rennell," came a gentle voice from behind him. Robert Seaton had approached unobtrusively: raising his pipestem in salutation to Nigel, he sat down cross-legged on the grass beside them.

"But I am. Quite sure. I've lived hard before, and I could again."

"Same here," murmured the poet. "Though I'd rather not." There was an appeased, detached, floating-in-air look about him, a look of delightful exhaustion which Nigel had noticed often enough before during this last week: the poem was evidently still going well.

"What are you two talking about?" he asked.

Nigel said, "Artistic integrity."

"Oh, that. Dear me." The poet waved it away with the stem of his pipe. The effect on Rennell Torrance was positively embarrassing. His slack, heavy body stiffened with the rage of some long-suppressed emotion. Was it pure jealousy? Nigel wondered: or was it fear, finding a safe outlet here?

"That's absolutely typical of you, Bob," Torrance said. "You've made a name. You can afford to lie back on your bed of laurels and be amused at the idea of integrity. Or you think you can. But by God! at least I do produce some work. I may be living on charity, but I've not been corrupted by luxury, not been atrophied. The artist lives the life of a *bourgeois rentier* at his peril, and you damned well know it. One of these fine days you'll be asked to account for your talent. And you'll have to answer, 'I buried it, Master—buried it under a heap of roses.' "

The tirade continued bitterly for some time. When it was ended, Robert Seaton said,

"How you do fuss, Rennell! I don't believe in all this fussing about integrity and the proper life for the creative artist. It just uses up energy that ought to go into one's work. There's only one thing people like you and me need to pray for—" the little figure on the grass was oddly impressive "—patience. Patience. And an Act of God. We can do something about the former: the latter—that's His worry."

"Oh phooey! And He moves in a mysterious way, you'll say next. He's certainly taken a long time to—"

"He does indeed," remarked the poet, a queer little ripple of humor passing over his face. "A very mysterious way indeed. However, we must take Him as we find Him."

Nigel could feel, like an emanation, the poet's authority. No, it was not exactly authority: it was a supreme inward confidence, which made him, for the present at any rate, intact and inviolable. No wonder he exasperated Rennell Torrance beyond measure. There was no getting at Robert Seaton just now. Nigel said,

"This is all very interesting. But I came here about a different kind of mystery."

"The bloody old murder," said Rennell Torrance, who had been refreshing himself once again from the bottle. "Very sordid. Not at all the sort of thing we Laceys are accustomed to."

"What the police will ask you," pursued Nigel, using his convenient formula, "is why you were so extraordinarily disturbed by the head."

"The police are damn fools then. Who wouldn't be disturbed when a head falls out of a tree right at his feet?"

"I don't mean that head. I mean the clay head your daughter did. Before she altered it. While it still bore the expression of a fiend. Of Oswald Seaton."

"Ah yes. It certainly did give me a turn. The expression on it, I mean. Queer girl, Mara," said her father.

"But a clever bit of modeling doesn't give one a heart attack. Unless—"

"Unless?" interrupted Torrance pugnaciously.

"Well—I'm only telling you what the police will think—if you'd killed Oswald Seaton the week before, and removed his head, and then were confronted by the living image of it in your studio, that would account for—"

"What utter bunk! I—we all had Oswald on our minds just then, quite naturally, and—"

"Oh no. There was no reason, at that time, for anyone to dream that the murdered man was Oswald Seaton. Anyone but the murderer, that is," Nigel cut in swiftly.

"Look here, this is outrageous! Who the devil are you to come pestering us like this? A bloody nosy-parker, setting your piddling little verbal traps!"

Rennell Torrance clawed himself out of his chair and loomed unsteadily above Nigel. He was almost beside himself with anger: but it was the anger of a frightened man; and well it might be, thought Nigel, after such a slip.

"Don't get so fussed, Rennell. Strangeways is only telling us what our behavior looks like from the police point of view. We should be grateful to him," said Robert Seaton, who had been listening to the previous exchanges with the birdlike, intent attitude, which was becoming familiar to Nigel. "The most trying thing about a business like this is that the innocent and the guilty are equally in the dark. The police pop in and out, asking everyone the most prosaic, drab questions—it's like a bad play, really; you've no idea what goes on in the characters' minds when they're off the stage."

If Robert Seaton had been talking to gain time for Torrance to recover his composure, he was successful enough.

"Trying, you call it? It certainly is. Though *you* don't seem to turn a hair," grumbled the painter. He sat down again, poured himself another drink and turned to Nigel. "I'll tell you why Mara's head upset me. The last time I saw Oswald, he did look just like that. Quite literally, his head was the last I saw of him."

Robert Seaton unexpectedly chuckled. "Rennell has a great turn for the macabre," he remarked, with childlike appreciation.

"Oswald was walking away over the dunes," Torrance continued. "Scrambling down the far side of one of them, he turned round. I saw his head over the top, looking back. His body was cut off by the line of the dune. Quite prophetic."

"When did this happen?" asked Nigel. "You don't mean—?"

"Yes. It was ten years ago. The evening he—er—disappeared. I was probably the last person to see him."

"We were all there," said Robert Seaton. "In the neighborhood, I mean. Oswald had asked—"

"Just a minute," Nigel interrupted. "This never came out at the inquiry, did it?"

Rennell Torrance replied, "My seeing him? No, it didn't."

Nigel had found himself extraordinarily disconcerted by this revelation. He had an odd impression, too, that Seaton and Torrance were not just stone-walling; that they were stealing quick runs, and for the moment at any rate there was a close understanding between them. Or could it be that, to change the metaphor, they were shortening their front? Was one important position being surrendered, the better to defend some key point?

"Why not?" he asked, rather feebly.

"Why didn't it come out? Because I wasn't asked about it, I suppose," said the painter.

Robert Seaton knocked out his pipe on the leg of Nigel's chair. "I think you should be a bit more forthcoming, Rennell," he said.

"Well, then. All the evidence pointed to Oswald's having committed suicide. There was a farewell letter and so on. If I'd said I was on the dunes, too, and had seen him, well, it might have been misunderstood, produced unnecessary complications."

"You mean, you might have been suspected of doing away with him?"

The painter nodded curtly.

"The police would have discovered you had a motive for killing him?"

"Everyone who knew Oswald had a motive for killing him," said Torrance, rather theatrically. "He was a running sore on the face of humanity, if you don't mind my saying so, Bob."

"So your motive would have been one of pure social hygiene?" Nigel commented. "Oh well, if you're determined to be evasive—"

"I'm sorry, but—oh, damn it all, it's not my secret only! It affects other people."

Nigel got the impression that the painter, though he studiously avoided looking at Robert Seaton, was really addressing him—whether in appeal or in challenge, Nigel could not be sure. He heard Seaton gently murmuring,

He had done most bitter wrong
To some who are near my heart.

"I think we'd better stop talking in rhymed riddles," said Nigel irritably. "But first, may I have all the facts about your brother's fake suicide? There seems to be quite a lot that didn't come out at the inquiry, or didn't get into the papers anyway. What were you doing there, for instance?" Nigel asked Torrance.

There was a marked silence. So the run-stealers are a bit rattled, thought Nigel; they'd like to have a few private words with each other between the wickets; but they won't, if I can prevent it.

At last, Rennell Torrance took up the parable. The story as he told it, calling on Seaton for corroboration from time to time, or led on by a question from Nigel, and as Nigel himself wrote it down shortly afterward for Blount to have checked by Inspector Slingsby, the officer working on that end of the case, ran as follows:

The Torrances had first met Oswald Seaton while on a caravan holiday in 1937. He had allowed them to camp in the Plash Meadow fields and supplied them with milk and water. The following summer he invited Rennell and Mara to stay at his holiday cottage in the Quantocks, half a mile from the sea. The other members of the party were Robert Seaton, Janet Lacey and her mother.

It was in the second week of this holiday, the last week of August, that the "suicide" occurred. Two days before, Mara, then aged fifteen, was taken seriously ill with what seemed to be a kind of nervous breakdown. She had been nursed by Janet Lacey: but, according to Rennell, it was chiefly Robert Seaton's care and solicitude for the girl which finally restored her to health. Janet Lacey, who was going through a Christian Scientist phase at the time, had persuaded Rennell not to call in a doctor.

Oswald Seaton himself had been very much on edge the previous week. It was his first holiday from the business since the death of his father, two years before; but he seemed unable to keep his mind off it, was continually ringing up the Redcote factory, complaining to Robert about the strain of the work, the severity of foreign competition, etc., and was subject to alternations of irritability and extreme depression. These were aggravated by Mara's illness—he had taken quite a fancy to the girl and used to spoil her with presents; indeed she was the only member of his house party who had seemed able to raise his spirits. When Mara fell ill, Janet Lacey had her hands full: for, as well as looking after the girl, she had also to minister to her host, Oswald having got it into his head that he was responsible for Mara's illness, through having kept her out too long in the fierce heat of the previous day, and allowed her to get sunstroke. However that might be, he had turned to Janet in this new trouble, and when she was not at the girl's bedside, she was usually with him.

After dinner on the evening of his disappearance, Oswald had seemed half distraught. He said to his brother, "I can't stand this bloody house another minute. I'm going for a walk. Don't let anyone wait up for me." Robert went upstairs and read to Mara for an hour or so, then went to bed. Old Mrs. Lacey had already retired. Janet, who was sleeping in Mara's room, went to bed soon after Robert had left the girl. Rennell Torrance had gone out for a walk when dinner was over. No doubt he had dined heavily. He fell asleep in a pocket of the dunes, a hundred yards or so away from the sea. Awaked by the sound of feet scrunching the sand, he had seen in the last of the daylight Oswald Seaton walking seaward, away to his left. Oswald turned round once, before disappearing behind the last ridge of dunes: whether he had noticed Rennell Torrance, the latter could not be sure. A sea mist, which had been hovering over the Channel, was now beginning to drift inshore. Rennell heard the scrape of a boat being launched from the secluded cove beyond. He assumed Oswald to have gone fishing, as he occasionally did late in the evening.

The next day, fishermen had found Oswald's dinghy anchored in the Channel, a mile from shore. It was empty, but for his clothes and, pinned to the coat, a letter for Robert. Oswald was known to be a very poor swimmer. Tracks of footprints offered by the dunes and the muddy foreshore proved that nobody had accompanied Oswald in the boat. The police had no doubt made exhaustive inquiries as to the possibility of Oswald's having transshipped from his own boat to another. Four factors had weighed heavily in their final decision to accept the disappearance as a suicide, and in that of the probate court when later it gave leave to presume Oswald Seaton's death:

First, Oswald's farewell letter, which was indisputably genuine.

Second, the testimony of the members of his house party as to his disordered state of mind during the previous days, the way his business affairs had been preying on his mind, etc.

Third, the fact that he had not drawn any large sums out of the bank in the preceding weeks, which he would certainly have done if he was planning a disappearance.

Fourth, the fact that within the last three years the bodies of two holidayers drowned off this stretch of coast had never been recovered.

The crucial point, as Nigel and Blount agreed when they were discussing Rennell Torrance's information later in the day, was the third one. Clearly Oswald Seaton could not have got out of the country without money. He had withdrawn no large sum from his own bank: therefore he must have been financed. A considerable amount of money would have been required, for, apart from Oswald's personal expenses, it seemed pretty certain that he must have been taken off his own dinghy by some local fisherman or boatman and landed further along the coast under cover of the sea mist that night, and this man would have to be paid a lot of money to keep his mouth shut during the subsequent inquiry.

"A fairish outlay of cash," said Blount. "Two or three hundred pounds at least, I'd imagine. The question is, whom did it pay to lay out such a sum?"

"Robert Seaton. On the face of it. But it's not as simple as all that. In the first place, he was very poor still, as far as we know. Where'd he raise the money? Secondly, I just don't believe he's the kind of man who'd organize a conspiracy of this kind in order to get hold of his brother's property."

"That's a matter of opinion. Besides—look here, Strangeways, it was your own theory that Oswald was persuaded or compelled to disappear by some person or persons who knew a guilty secret of his, knew he'd committed some criminal offense which so far had been kept dark. Isn't that so?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, Robert Seaton is a quixotic character, you say. And I got the impression myself, talking to him this afternoon, that in spite of everything he'd had a real feeling for his brother—there was a sort of bond between them. Don't you think Robert might have helped his brother to fake the suicide, not for what he'd get out of it himself, but simply to save him from worse—from imprisonment, from ruin and total disgrace?"

"Ye-es. Yes, I do think that's possible," said Nigel slowly.

"And it would account for the Torrances being his pensioners. Rennell Torrance was there at the time. He'd every opportunity to discover that some hanky-panky was going on. We've only his word for it that he saw the last of Oswald Seaton on the dunes that night. He may have followed him down to the foreshore and heard him being transshipped later. At any rate, he's been living in comfort here since 1945. And you can't account for the Seatons' tolerating a slob like him about the place, except on the theory that he discovered the conspiracy of Oswald's 'suicide,' and has been cozily blackmailing Robert ever since. *Can* you?"

Nigel looked worried. At last he replied, "Well, I could. Though I mightn't be right. There's more than one kind of blood money . . . I wonder. I really shall have to have a talk with young Mara now. I've put it off too long."

But the talk was fated to a further postponement. That same evening, at six o'clock, just as Nigel was walking across the court toward the old barn, he heard the galloping of hooves. It was Vanessa Seaton, on Kitty. She tore into the courtyard, her hair streaming behind her, reined up the horse near Nigel and excitedly announced,

"I've found Finny!"

Chapter 9

Finny Black Turns Up

Taking the horse by the bridle, Nigel led it and its fair rider out of earshot of the house. Vanessa dismounted, rather cumbrously, slung about as she was with a variety of impedimenta—haversack, field glasses, water bottle, camera case and an ancient bandolier—so that she resembled some intrepid pioneeress of covered-wagon days.

"You'd better tell me about it while you unsaddle this animal," said Nigel.

"He's in the church. I saw him from Meldon Hill. On the tower. Has he taken sanctuary, d'you think? What's the rule about that nowadays? Can the police drag him from the altar, or must they get the vicar's permission first?"

"Just a minute, begin at the beginning. You can take Kitty's saddle off while you talk. My word, she's been sweating."

"Yes, I galloped all the way back. Janet would be furious if she knew. You won't tell her, will you?"

"No. But she's bound to have heard you. You sounded like the charge of the Heavy Brigade. Well, you were on Meldon Hill—"

"Yes. It's just over there." Vanessa pointed at a cobweb on the stable ceiling. "I saw him through my field glasses."

"What were you doing on the hill?"

"I was Developing my Initiative. Lieutenant says that tracking is one of the best ways of developing your initiative. She says that the Mothers of the Future must be Fearless and Self-Reliant, and of course truly Womanly. You know?—Steel-true and blade-straight—that's how Englishmen like their mates, isn't it?"

"Well, some do, no doubt," replied Nigel cautiously. "But—"

"I don't see, myself, how tracking makes you blade-straight, since you're bent double half the time—oh, damn this buckle!—Where was I?"

"On Meldon Hill."

"Oh yes. As a matter of fact I've been tracking Finny ever since he disappeared. In my spare time. I thought he was a gargoyle at first."

"A gargoyle?"

"Yes. There's one at each corner of the tower, you know. So when I was raking the countryside with my powerful glasses and saw his head, sort of resting on the coping of the church tower, I thought for a moment it was a gargoyle. Poor Finny. He's ugly enough for one, isn't he?"

"Did he move? I mean—"

"Oh, he's not dead. I went to see."

"Did you indeed?"

"Yes, I galloped down the hill and up the spiral staircase in the tower—I left Kitty outside the church of course. But he wasn't there any longer. Expect he heard me coming. Guess what I found, though."

"I can't imagine."

"Crumbs," announced Vanessa, in a bloodcurdling whisper. "Here, help me off with my accouterments. . . . Thanks awfully. I put them in one of the pocket things of the bandolier. Detectives always seem to carry envelopes about with them to put clues in: but I hadn't—oh, here it is."

She hooked out with her middle finger a few morsels of cake.

"Do you recognize these crumbs?" she demanded.

"Well, no, I don't think—"

"*I* do. I'll *swear* they're from the cake I helped Mrs. Fitch to make the other day. I bet you Finny's been getting into the house at night and taking things from the larder. What are you going to do about it?"

"There was no sign of him in the church?"

"Only these crumbs. I found them in such a funny place too. Guess where."

"In the pocket of the vicar's cassock."

"No. Have you been in our church? Well, there are some effigies of the Laceys, kneeling at sort of stone prayer desks. In a chapel over the vault. And the crumbs were on one of the desks. Just as if this crusader Lacey was saying grace after eating his tea."

"Did you call to Finny when you were in the church?"

"No, of course not. I was tracking him, I told you."

"Have you told anyone else? As you went through the village, for instance?"

"No."

"Good. Now I want you to do two things. First, find out tactfully from the cook if she's missed any food out of the larder during the last two days. Second, don't tell her or anyone else that you've seen Finny. *Nobody* must know. O.K.?"

"Not even Lionel?"

"Not even Lionel. It's *very* important."

"Well, I'll try," said Vanessa dubiously. "But Li always seems to know when I've got a secret, and he worms it out of me somehow."

As soon as Vanessa had left him, Nigel made off to the vicarage, which stood beside the church at the other end of the village. He introduced himself to the vicar, whom he had not met before, as a friend of the Seatons; the telephone at Plash Meadow was out of order, he said—might he use the vicar's?

After two ineffectual calls, he got Blount at the Redcote police station. He told him of Vanessa's discovery. He asked Blount for two men to be posted unobtrusively, one in the church, one in the churchyard, by dusk. No, they were not to look for Finny: he would keep till tomorrow morning. Yes, he could guarantee that Finny would not make a break for it. No, he had not been into the church yet himself, but he had a pretty good idea where Finny was concealed. Yes, that was the idea—either Finny would emerge to steal some more food from Plash Meadow, in which case one of the watchers could follow him; or someone at Plash Meadow would be bringing food to the church under cover of darkness, in which case—no, he didn't know who it was. Yes, he was pretty sure that, if anyone at Plash Meadow was concealing Finny Black, that person would show his hand tonight.

Blount said he would attend to the matter himself, in company with Sergeant Bower. Would Nigel arrange for the vicar to receive them about 9:30 P.M.? They could wait in the vicarage till darkness fell.

Nigel rang off and returned to the vicar's study, feeling more than ever a snake in the grass, if that reptile can be supposed to entertain qualms of conscience. He reminded himself that all he was doing, at the moment, was to safeguard Finny's life. Or was he? In a sense, there seemed no necessity to do so. If Finny were a danger to X., and if X. knew where Finny was, X. would not be so officiously keeping him alive. But perhaps the food had been brought by Y. Perhaps there was a Y. who had arranged for Finny to lie concealed in—

"I believe you have some remarkable effigies in your church, sir."

"You are an antiquarian, sir?" asked the vicar, a waffling and well-nigh senile man.

"I am interested in the Lacey family."

"You must let me show them to you. Very fine twelfth-century stonework. Can you spare ten minutes? . . . No trouble, I assure you. I do not have my supper for half an hour yet."

They stepped into the small, musty church. A greenish light filtered through the window, half-obscured by ivy, of the little chapel in the southeast corner. The chapel was chock full, like a box room, with relics of mortality. Tablets, urns, recumbent figures; enough miscellaneous stone legs and arms, detached from their original trunks, to have fitted out, it seemed, a whole dynasty of Ozymandiases: and, against the south wall, six figures in pairs, husband and wife, kneeling each at a *prie-Dieu.*

"Observe the chiseling of the baldric," quavered the vicar enthusiastically. "These are probably the finest examples of—"

But Nigel was observing a small door, let into the thickness of the great stone plinth upon which the effigies knelt: three steps led down to it from the east side, and there were footprints in the dust that lay thick upon them.

"—the normal practice of the stonemasons of the twelfth century," the vicar was saying. His dim eye became aware of a certain inattentiveness on Nigel's part, who was in fact trying with his little finger the keyhole of the vault door.

"Ah, you are interested in the family vault. Note the coat-of-arms, subscribed with the motto *'Quis Lacey Lacesset?'* Who dares provoke, or perhaps better, challenge, a Lacey? The homophone, or play on words, can hardly be rendered in our own tongue. A most historic family, the Laceys." The vicar groped at the back of his mind, like a shortsighted man for a lost collar stud, and produced, *"Si monumentum requiris, circumspice"*—which seemed to Nigel, under the circumstances, something in the nature of a truism.

"Do you have a key to this door?" he asked.

"I—er, yes. But it may not be opened, of course, without the authorization of Mrs. Seaton, or her legal representatives. No doubt, should you wish to inspect, to—er—examine the vault, she would lend you her own key. It has not been opened since her dear mother was laid to rest: some six or seven years ago, that would be."

Nigel privily rubbed a stain of oil off his little finger and professed himself satisfied.

At dinner, an hour later, Vanessa studiously avoided his eye. It was apparent to him that she had not been able to keep the secret. Which was what Nigel had counted on.

Lying awake, soon after midnight, he heard footsteps cautiously approach his door and stop. He breathed louder and slower, mumbled to himself as if in sleep. The feet moved away. Nigel pulled the bedclothes closer and composed himself for genuine sleep. It was up to Blount now. . . .

The next morning, Vanessa entered his bedroom, looking sullen and mutinous.

"You're to have breakfast in bed," she announced, still avoiding his eye. "There's a flap on downstairs."

"Finny?"

She nodded dumbly; then burst into tears. "It *wasn't* my fault," she sobbed. "I couldn't help seeing him on the tower—and telling someone—telling you. Li is furious."

"You told him the secret too? Last night? Oh, Vanessa!" said Nigel gently.

"He heard me asking Mrs. Fitch if she'd missed any food. You know how you have to bawl at her. Then he dragged it out of me."

"And had she missed any?"

"Yes. Oh, I hate all this," she desolately exclaimed. "Why should it happen to us? I'd been so looking forward to these holidays. And now everything's gone wrong. Everyone's trying to keep things from me, and snapping my head off if I ask questions, and Daddy's been too busy to talk to me like he used to and go on expeditions. And Lionel—why is everyone so different? Oh, I do feel miserable! They ought to be glad I found Finny for them. But—" she choked, and burst into tears again.

"Look, Vanessa—come and sit on the bed a minute. There. I know it's absolutely foul for you. But you've just got to live through bad times like this. Everyone does. They come to an end, sooner or later, and you find you're still alive, and you can look back at them and understand what they were all about. At your age, it's difficult to believe they won't go on forever, isn't it? It's like one of those dreams, when you dream you're lost, and you know you're dreaming, yet you can't wake up. But you always do wake up." Nigel stroked the girl's hair. "My wife was killed in the war. She was driving an ambulance through a blitz: refused to get out and take cover. Well, I thought that was the end of *my* life. You understand? She was rather like you, in some ways. She was extremely brave: an explorer. Perhaps you'll be one, when you grow up. Her explorations made her a famous woman. I remember her telling me once how she'd got lost in a wood, quite near home—she was about thirteen then. Just about your age. She got into an absolute panic, worse and worse, she told me, and went tearing round in circles bashing into trees: well, really, it was as if the trees were bashing into her, and the branches deliberately whippping her face, and the brambles tripping her up. She was quite lost. Everything seemed against her. And soon it would be night. Do you know what she did?"

Vanessa shook her head, glancing up at him sideways through her tumbled hair.

"She sat down with her back against a tree, and made three resolutions. First, always to carry a compass with her in the future: second, to remember that no wood goes on forever: and third, to go to sleep for a bit. And that's what she always did afterward, when she became an explorer and got a bit panicky."

"And what happened that time, in the wood?"

"Oh, she went to sleep, and woke up an hour or so later, and walked slap out of the wood as easy as pie."

Vanessa gazed at him a moment with tear-brilliant eyes. Then she flung her arms round his neck, kissed him heartily, and ran out of the room.

Three hours later, as Nigel was walking in the orchard to clear his head before the meeting Blount had fixed for midday, he came upon Vanessa Seaton. Her back was against a tree. Tiptoeing up, Nigel perceived she was peacefully slumbering, a small pocket compass on her lap. "Pleasant dreams," he murmured, and retraced his steps. Poor Vanessa! —she would have need of them before long. "Yes, we found him all right," Blount had said hurriedly when they met an hour ago. "He came out of the vault—had a key in his pocket. *And* we found Oswald Seaton's clothes there. A lot of bloodstains on 'em. Why didn't Gates think to look?—Why didn't I, for the matter of that?"

"Not a churchgoing generation," Nigel offered.

"Pish! And who should turn up in the middle of it all? Robert Seaton. Out for one of his nocturnal perambulations, he said. No food on him, anyway. Heard a noise in the church. You bet he did: I was trying to get a grip on the wee dwarf—he fought like a demon: then Seaton came in and called out to him and he went quiet as a lamb."

So now, Nigel apostrophized the calm face of Plash Meadow, so now what have you got in store? How many more tricks up your sleeve, you charming illusionist? And when will you cease pulling wool over my eyes?

What Plash Meadow had had in store for him, thought Nigel as he entered the dining room a few minutes later, appeared to be a Board Meeting. Robert, Janet and Lionel, Rennell and Mara Torrance sat round the table, fidgeting, muttering or impassive, each according to his temperament. At the head sat the Chairman of the Directors, impersonated by Blount. A little behind Blount, notebook open on knee, the confidential secretary, Sergeant Bower. The eyes of Henry Lacey gazed bleakly down at them from above the mantelpiece: the Company is not what it was, they seemed to be saying, when I was Managing Director.

"Ah, there you are, Strangeways," said Blount. "Sit down. I thought you had all better be present when I questioned Finny Black. As you know, we found him last night. He'd been hiding—" Blount coughed primly "—or hidden, in the family vault. He's none the worse, I'm glad to say, for his—e'eh, immurement. Of course, one of you must have given him the key that night he ran away after attacking Mr. Strangeways, and kept him supplied with food. It'd save a lot of trouble if that person would now come forward."

The Board of Directors shifted their feet, muttered, avoided one another's eyes, in the awkward pause that followed. How absurdly guilty they all look, thought Nigel—particularly Robert Seaton, with that angelic expression of innocence, like a dear little choirboy bluffing it out on the vicar.

"Surely it's possible that Finny took the key himself and stole the food out of our larder at night," suggested Janet Seaton.

"I'm afraid not," Blount replied. "He'd have left his fingerprints. And there aren't any. As to the key, now— But, if no one will volunteer the information, I'll have to ask Finny himself. Bower, will you—?"

"I will not have Finny bullied," said Janet with strong emphasis.

Blount replied suavely, "You are all here to see that he is not."

"I think," began Robert Seaton. His son interrupted him: lounging back in his chair, eyes on the ceiling, Lionel Seaton said coolly,

"Oh well then. I hid Finny and acted as his supply line."

Mara Torrance's hand flew to her mouth, stifling a cry. Janet knitted her thick brows at her stepson.

"You? But Lionel, why?—"

"I hid Finny and brought him food," Lionel repeated more loudly. "I—"

"Damn it, Bower, come back! We don't want him yet," Blount exclaimed to his sergeant, who had moved to the door just now, in smart anticipation of his superior's command, and opened it. Finny Black, a uniformed policeman close by, was sitting outside.

Blount turned upon Lionel when the door was shut again.

"You realize you were obstructing the police in their duties by what you did?"

"I suppose I was," the young man equably replied. "I'm sorry. I just wanted to give him a chance."

"A chance to do what?" asked Blount, manfully refraining his exasperation.

"Oh, get his second wind, pull himself together. He was scared stiff after what happened that night. I found him quite soon, near the river. I thought he might be going to chuck himself in. So I told him to go to the church and wait for me. Then I came back here. And later that night I slipped out again with some food and the key of the vault. I told him to pop into the vault if anyone came along. He thought it was a new sort of game."

"It was an odd hiding place to think of, Mr. Seaton."

"I suppose it was," said Lionel. "But poor Finny wouldn't mind a few Lacey skeletons, you know. And I did hate the idea of his being chivvied all over the countryside by the constabulary."

The superintendent unmasked a battery. "Had you not already used the vault as a hiding place? Wasn't that why it occurred to you at once as the best place to conceal Finny Black?"

"I don't get you."

"Was it not you who put the bloodstained clothes of Oswald Seaton in the vault, where I found them last night?"

"The bloodstained—? Well I'm jiggered!"

The whole company rocked visibly at this blow. Rennell Torrance's eyes bulged. Janet's hand went to her throat. Robert pursed his lips as if to whistle. Mara was staring desperately at Lionel, who alone seemed, after his first exclamation, to be taking the thing in his stride.

"Now this won't do at all," he said. "In the first place, if I'd murdered Oswald, I'd never be so dim-witted as to hide Finny in the very spot where I'd hidden my victim's clothes. And secondly, if I'd murdered Oswald, I wouldn't have hidden Finny at all; not alive, anyway. Finny'd be much too dangerous to have about the place. I'd have pushed him into the river—he can't swim, you know—or locked him up in the vault, dead. Wouldn't I now?" The remarkable young man gazed blandly at Blount. "I'm assuming," he added, "that all this fuss about Finny is because you think he knows who murdered Oswald."

Nigel had a sudden conviction that this performance was partly for Mara's benefit. The girl was certainly gazing at Lionel now as if she saw him in a new light. So, for that matter, was Superintendent Blount.

"Very well then," he said. "I'll come back to you later. Bring in Finny Black now, Sergeant."

The scene, as always happened when the dwarf appeared on the stage, took a grotesque turn. What was it now? A midget being interviewed for a key post? An oracle being consulted? No, thought Nigel as the uncouth mannikin climbed on to a chair beside Superintendent Blount and sat there, his legs sticking out straight in front of him, his square mouth gaping like a box, a patch of red on each cheek, this is the ventriloquist's act. The illusion was increased by the mechanical way in which Finny's head turned to Blount at every question, and by the bizarre grunts and cluckings that came from his lips.

"Now you understand, Finny, that you must tell us the truth, don't you?" Blount was saying. "Mr. Seaton wants you to tell the truth. Isn't that so?"

"Yes, Finny must tell the truth," said Robert Seaton.

"I'm going to ask you questions," Blount went on. "You can nod for 'yes' and shake your head for 'no.' If you don't know the answer, put up both your hands. If you don't understand the question, put up one hand. Do you follow me?"

Finny gurgled, nodding vigorously.

"Good. Now, Finny, you've been asked some of these questions before. Never mind that. You know that a man was murdered here?"

Finny nodded.

"Did you kill him yourself?"

Finny, gibbering, shook his head so violently that it seemed as if it might fly off his neck.

"Did you see this man, alive, the night of the thunderstorm?"

Shake.

"Did you find his head and climb up the chestnut tree with it and hide it there?"

Finny looked puzzled, put his hand over his face with a smearing movement; then tentatively held up the other hand.

"You don't understand my question?"

"I think he's confused between the two heads," suggested Robert Seaton.

"Ah yes. Finny, I'm not talking about the clay head, the model one of Mr. Seaton, which you took just before you ran away. I'm talking about the real one—" Blount had a grisly inspiration "—the one with blood on its neck."

Finny's face lit up. He nodded cheerfully.

"You took that head and hid it up the tree?"

Nod.

"Did you find it—e'eh—in the house somewhere?"

Shake.

"Out of doors?"

"Oh for God's sake!" Mara Torrance exclaimed, almost whimpering. "Must we listen while—it's like a game of Twenty Questions. I can't stand—"

"Be quiet, Miss Torrance! Compose yourself!" said the superintendent very firmly. "Did you find this head, the bloody head, in—e'eh—in the dairy, perhaps?"

Finny clucked and nodded, bouncing a little in his chair.

"The dairy. Just so. Was the head in a net?" Blount made a sort of conjuror's movement, and held a net shopping bag up to Finny. "Something like this?"

The dwarf nodded.

"When you found the head in the dairy—we'll go out presently and you can show me just exactly where you found it—did you see the man's body too?"

Shake.

"You didn't. Was the light on in the dairy? The electric light?"

Finny shook his head, but looked troubled. He made a writing movement. Blount at once put paper and pencil before him; and Finny, tongue in cheek, laboriously scrawled a word.

"Oh, I see. 'Lantern.' There was a storm lantern there, already lit?"

Nod.

"Vairy good, Finny. You're doing fine. Have you any idea what the time was when you found the head?"

Finny put up both hands.

"Do you remember, was it raining when you went into the dairy?"

Finny's big head rolled on his neck. He began to put up both hands. Then he startled the audience by standing upright on the chair, and doing a little pantomime. His eyes winced; a growling sort of bark issued from his throat.

"Lightning and thunder," said Lionel Seaton.

"Capital, Finny! Excellent! There was lightning and thunder when you went to the dairy, not rain?"

The dwarf nodded, beamed hideously all round, chuckling and clapping his hands at his own cleverness. Then he resumed his seat.

"When you found the head, did you also see a heap of clothes?"

Nod.

"Did you take those clothes away and hide them somewhere else?"

Shake.

"You're quite sure, Finny? It wasn't you who put them in the vault, in the church, where I found you last night?"

Finny Black shook his head vigorously. A hissing sigh was heard from Rennell Torrance.

"You didn't touch that heap of clothes in the dairy at all?"

Shake.

"Very well. Now, Finny, when you went out that night, and into the dairy and hid the head, and then went for a little walk by yourself, did you see anyone else about? Anyone you knew?"

Not by the faintest change of intonation did Blount betray the urgency of this question. The figures round the table might have been turned to stone. Bower's pen was poised above his notebook. Finny looked exceedingly troubled. His eyes flickered toward Robert Seaton, as if in appeal.

"You must tell the truth, Finny," said the poet gently.

Finny gobbled and grimaced a little, jigging uneasily in his chair. Then, with an eeny-meeny-miny-mo gesture which recalled for Nigel a similar one made by Mara at the tea party in June, the dwarf's arm and outstretched finger moved slowly round the company and stopped at Rennell Torrance.

The painter sprang to his feet. "That's a lie!" he roared. "He couldn't have seen me. I was—"

"Sit down at once, Mr. Torrance, and don't interrupt again, or I'll have to ask you to leave the room," said Blount sharply. He turned again to Finny, who was cowering away from Torrance's outburst, and resumed his patient, quiet questioning. He elicited the information that Finny had seen Rennell Torrance standing just outside the French windows of the old barn: this had happened when he returned from his "little walk"; and Robert and Janet had already testified that Finny had come back "drenched to the skin" about an hour after they'd gone out to look for him—that is, about two o'clock.

"Very well," said Blount, "we'll return to that presently. Now, Finny. Did you see anyone else that night?"

The dwarf shook his head, but rather uncertainly. Then, after a hesitation, he pointed to his ear.

"Oh, you *heard* someone, but didn't see who it was? Splendid, Finny. We're getting on fine, aren't we?"

The gruesome game of question and answer went on. Finny, it appeared, had heard someone walking up toward the house from the direction of the river. This, as far as he could satisfactorily make it known, seemed to have happened not long after he'd come down from the tree, while he was wandering about at the end of the orchard nearest the river. It proved impossible to fix the time more precisely: nor could Finny say whether the footsteps he had heard were a man's or a woman's. The dwarf was clearly tired by now. His hand smeared more frequently across his face; and his brain, such as it was, showed signs of becoming confused.

"I've only two more questions, Finny," said Blount, mopping his brow. "You've been very good. But, you know, some of these things I've been asking you about—well, you could have told us before and saved us a lot of trouble. Why didn't you? Did someone tell you not to answer the police questions?"

Finny nodded, a last flicker of intelligence—or was it gratified self-importance?—in his eyes.

"Who was it?"

Finny pointed, without hesitation, to Janet Seaton.

"Oh, Finny!" she murmured, in a deeply wounded voice. "Oh Finny, how could you?"

"And my last question—who gave you the key of the vault and told you to stay hidden in the church?"

Finny's eyes went wild, staring in a sort of agony of inarticulateness at the side of the table where Robert, Janet and Lionel were sitting together. Foam appeared on his lips. Like a ventriloquist's dummy he folded up and fell off his chair.

Chapter 10

Mara Torrance Remembers

"I can't make out what everyone's playing at here," remarked Blount gloomily that afternoon, as he and Nigel sat down on the river bank near Hinton Lacey. "Young Seaton, for instance. He sticks to his story. Well, I ought to run him in, I suppose. But what'd be the use? It wouldn't solve the problem of this crime. He had the nerve to tell me he'd no objection to a spell in quod—couldn't be worse than the army, he said."

"We're getting old, Blount. We don't understand the younger generation."

"Do *you* think it was Lionel Seaton who hid Finny?"

"I doubt it. That's why Finny passed out this morning. He has a very primitive, very loyal mind. You handled him beautifully, by the way. But, you see, Robert Seaton had told him he must tell the truth: on the other hand, Finny had heard Lionel declare it was *he* who'd supplied the key and the food—your sergeant conveniently opened the door just when Lionel was making this confession."

"Damned fool, Bower!" muttered the superintendent.

"So a conflict of loyalties was set up in Finny's mind, and he passed out. Which suggests it was not Lionel who'd been hiding him."

"Well, why on earth should he say he was, then?"

"Protecting his father, I fancy. But the really fascinating question is, why should Finny have been allowed to survive at all?"

"A damned waste of our time! We might have had half the Oxfordshire police chasing after him for weeks if young Miss Seaton hadn't spotted him yesterday."

"That's just the point," said Nigel. "Someone is playing for time. Is it the murderer? If so, why not have killed Finny and put him in the vault? It'd serve the same purpose, and get rid of a damnably dangerous witness. If it was not the murderer, then what's he playing for time *for*—whoever hid Finny?"

"Search me."

"Time for repentance. Time for tea. Time, you old gypsy man. Time present and time past. Time for—"

"Oh do stop burbling! Why, what the devil's up with you now?"

"Oh, my good Lord!" muttered Nigel. "I believe I've got it."

"Got what?"

"The right time, so to speak. D'you ever listen to the B.B.C. programs at week ends, Blount?"

"Och, you're just havering. No, I do not."

"I bet all those highbrow yokels at the Lacey Arms do. You just ask them. And if I'm right," Nigel went on meditatively, "we may be in for another crop of Mysterious Occurrences at any moment."

"Uh-huh? Such as?—"

"Oh, I don't know. Disappearances. Kidnappings. Anonymous letters. Can't say. Just you wait and see though."

"And what am I supposed to do about them?"

"Take my tip, Blount, and ignore 'em. Don't let 'em rattle you."

"You're in a strangely freevolous state of mind today. I'll leave you to it. Must go and ring up Bristol."

A quarter of an hour later—he was still lying near the river bank—Nigel heard the puttering of an engine from downstream. Presently Vanessa's head, tawny and disembodied, could be observed gliding smoothly as if on rails above the level of the water meadows away to the right, where the river bent backward in a long loop. Then, round the bend, came a motor canoe, Vanessa sitting upright in the stern, Lionel and Mara lolling side by side on the cushions amidships. As they approached, Nigel sat up and waved. Vanessa spun the wheel at her side; the canoe careened over, making direct for Nigel. The girl tugged at a lever, the craft shuddered like a fever victim as the engine went into reverse, then rammed the bank at Nigel's feet with a violent impact.

"Well done, Fatty!" said Lionel.

"I miscalculated," replied Vanessa, picking herself up from the floor of the canoe. "Are our bows stove in? Prepare to man the pumps!"

"Prepare to hop out and walk home, Love," said Lionel. "Mara and I want to have a talk with your Mr. Strangeways. In private. Buzz off now, there's a good girl."

Reluctantly Vanessa climbed ashore. "They've been holding hands all the way up the river," she remarked treacherously to Nigel as she turned to go. "Soppy things. At their age, too."

Nigel moored the canoe and climbed down into it, noticing that Mara had altered her sprawling posture on the cushions for a more decorous one.

"Where did you get this beautiful canoe?" he asked.

"Just been lent it by some friends at Shelford—three miles that direction." Lionel jerked his thumb over his shoulder, pointing downstream. "No objection, I hope."

"Don't be an ass."

"It's the trouble about your being identified with the police now," said Lionel equably. "One tends to read a sinister meaning into every remark you make."

"Yes, I suppose so." Nigel sighed. A cloud, passing over the sun, turned the river's face from blue-gray to olive-green. The water lisped against the bank. Nigel found himself wishing that Mara would take off the sun glasses which hid her eyes: and, as though she had read his thoughts, she removed them that moment.

"Look here," she said, "what side *are* you on?"

"How many sides have you?"

"I'm serious."

"So am I. It's not just a question of Rex v. Plash Meadow and the Old Barn, you see. There are so many conflicting interests among you all. Among the suspects."

"Such as?" asked Lionel, his keen young eyes fastened intently upon Nigel's face, as though it were the pressure gauge of some powerful and dangerous engine.

"Well, take Mara. She is torn between love of *your* father and a rather dim sense of loyalty to her own. Her position is further complicated now by her feeling for you: she's obviously taken to you since she saw the lengths you'd go to in protecting your father—taken to you, I mean, in a big way, not just the old cat-and-mouse line—"

"Well! I *must* say!" Mara raised her hands in pleased consternation.

"And on top of that," Nigel pursued, "she's got her own worry. Suppose *she* killed Oswald?"

"We won't suppose that," Lionel said, with dangerous calmness.

Mara put her hand on his. "Yes, we will. Why should I kill Oswald?"

"You told us the motive at tea, that day in June. You said there was only one thing you'd murder for. Revenge."

As if he'd knocked the breath out of them both, they faced him, open-mouthed and speechless. In the silence that followed, the plop of a water rat diving startled like a depth charge.

"Revenge? But why on earth should Mara—?" said Lionel at last.

So you *don't* know about it, thought Nigel. Well, I won't be the one to tell you. He said lightly,

"Oh, Mara's always had it in for—she's the kind who must take it out of people. You should know," Nigel went on vaguely. "But, going back to your first question, if you put it like this—which of you all would I most hate to be hanged for the murder of Oswald?—I'll tell you straight away. Robert Seaton."

He noticed Lionel's tense form relaxing. "Well, that's something," the young man said. "Not that there was any danger, I suppose, of—" his voice trailed away.

"I'm afraid there is, though. Your father had a stronger motive than anyone, except your stepmother, for doing it. And—"

"But he was out for a walk. He wouldn't—"

"Wouldn't go for a walk if he'd been expecting Oswald? But he might have gone to meet him. He went out on the road to Chillingham. He'd forgotten that Oswald wouldn't know the short cut through the wood had been wired up. He'd expect him to come along the road."

The expression of misery was deepening upon Mara's face. Her white fists lay beside her like tear-soaked, crumpled handkerchiefs. Nigel went on,

"If the police find out where Oswald stayed when he reached England, at Bristol or wherever it was; if they find anything to connect him with Robert—a letter, say, from Robert inviting him to come along to Ferry Lacey, to come secretly—well, it'll be very awkward for Robert indeed. You can see that."

"But my father *didn't* meet him on the road," said Lionel. "So—"

"There's no *proof* that Oswald was murdered at Plash Meadow. No proof he ever reached it."

Mara Torrance put her right hand slowly into the water. The Thames was not boiling, but the gesture unaccountably reminded Nigel of a medieval ordeal. She said,

"It would help if—if someone had seen him, Oswald, at Plash Meadow that night?"

"It might. Depends." Nigel studied her averted face. "But perjury never helps, not in the long run," he added.

"Don't be a fool, Mara," exclaimed Lionel, with a suddenly hostile glance at Nigel. "You can't trust him."

"I can't trust anyone," she replied drearily. "You'd better leave me to talk to Strangeways, darling. Go along. I must talk to him alone."

"No. I think it's a mistake."

"Go away. *Please.* I'm asking you."

"Oh well, if I'm not wanted—" Lionel sounded, for once, very young. Sulkily, he began to get out of the canoe.

"One thing before you go," said Nigel. "I've been meaning to ask you for some days. You said you slept right through the thunderstorms that night. But the night Finny Black set on me, and I shouted for help, you said it woke you up, and you came running out of the house at once. The statements don't seem to correspond."

Hands on hips, Lionel Seaton gazed down from the bank. His face was hard. "I can only suggest," he said, "that thunder doesn't wake me up, and shouts for help do. Make what you like of it." He turned on his heel and strode off across the meadow.

"You don't think?—" began Mara.

"It may be the simple truth. He was a soldier."

A silence fell between them. Now they were alone, Mara seemed to find it difficult to begin. Nigel studied the lank black hair, that had a gloss on it now, the pasty-white face with dark smudges like bruises under the eyes, the violent red of her mouth.

"Are you in love with him?"

The girl came out of her abstraction. "That's not the point." She patted the cushions beside her, giving Nigel a bold, delinquent-child look. "Come and sit here. Oh, it's all right," she added impatiently, "I shan't seduce you. Why is everyone afraid of me? I can't talk to you while you're looking at me like a mental specialist across a desk."

Nigel moved over to her side. "That better?"

"Mm. Nice, kind Uncle Strangeways." As if involuntarily, she had crept closer to him. He could feel the whole length of her leg pressed against his. She began to talk very fast, looking away. "I suppose I am. In love with Lionel, I mean. I'd like to go to bed with him, of course. It seems about all I'm good for—to go to bed with people. But he wants me to marry him. And I daren't. I'm no good, you see, I'm hopeless. I wouldn't care, if it was just Lionel—I'd risk it. But—"

She dried up suddenly, like the brief shower that is a precursor to the deluge.

"But you're afraid of hurting Robert Seaton, through his son?" Nigel prompted.

She nodded dumbly, wrenching hard at Nigel's hand. From the deck of a passing river steamer, three lads whistled and catcalled.

"You see? It's taken for granted I'm a tart."

"That's absurd. They'd whistle at a Salvation Army lass with spectacles."

The waves from the steamer's wake lifted the canoe, jostling them together. Nigel felt her breast against his arm. She flinched away, as if something had scorched her.

"I don't know where to begin," she said, breathing hard.

"I should begin at the beginning," said Nigel gently. "With Oswald. That day in the Quantocks. When you were fifteen."

Mara's body had gone rigid beside him, as if gripped by lockjaw. A lark sang its strident song interminably above the meadow. At last she muttered,

"So you knew?"

"I guessed. It was the most likely explanation. He—?"

"Oh yes, he raped me," she said bleakly. "Damn that lark. There was one singing when—"

"And you got ill. And Robert pulled you through it. And Oswald had to vanish. Well, it was all a long time ago. Hasn't the account been paid? On both sides?"

Mara gave him an oddly furtive look. "On both sides? You think I killed Oswald?"

"That's not what I meant. But never mind. So Robert got rid of Oswald, organized his 'suicide?' "

"Robert was—I can't describe how wonderful he was to me. He never put a foot wrong: I can see that now. Gentle and bracing, each at just the right time. Can you understand? It wasn't his fault that I'm—what I am. He stayed with me nearly the whole time. All day, for days after. And at nights—Janet was sleeping in my room—but I used to wake up screaming, I had awful nightmares, and Robert was always there in the next room to come in and soothe me down. Janet was no good. And my father—" She shrugged her shoulders with an ugly movement.

"They are the only people who know about it? Not Lionel?"

"I've never dared tell him."

"Which means you *are* in love with him. Well, I think you've been repressing all this far too long."

"Repressing? Oh, I don't believe all that Freud stuff—it's out of date," she said, with a return to her old, brittle manner.

"You don't quite understand me." Nigel, gazing at the fleecy clouds overhead, said very carefully, "Do you know why you're so unhappy? It's not because of what *happened* to you then. It's because you half-liked it."

"No! No! No! No!" The cries came out of her mouth like blood pulsating from a severed artery. Her hand writhed in his, the nails drove into his palm.

"Yes," Nigel said firmly. "And why in heaven's name shouldn't you? Nothing unnatural about that. Nothing to be ashamed of. *Yes.*"

"No," she whimpered. "No. No."

Nigel's voice went steadily, soothingly on. "That's why your head of Robert went wrong, and the figure in that bit of wood carving you did. You wanted it to be Robert. But Oswald came up out of your unconscious and pushed Robert aside, and took possession of your artist's hands, and made the clay head in his own image. It wouldn't have happened if you'd been altogether unwilling, if you'd altogether hated it—what Oswald did to you. It happened because part of you liked it, and the rest of you was terribly shocked and ashamed by it. Think, my dear. Remember back. Be absolutely honest with yourself. There was a lark singing. Remember? Don't be afraid of it. It's a bogey—a phantom of guilt you've kept battened down all these years. It's been poisoning your life, don't you see?"

"Yes," said Mara at last, after minutes of silence. Her voice was quite different. For the first time, Nigel dared to turn his head and look at her. Tears were streaming down her face which was calm, drained, almost happy, as if she had been listening to great music. "Yes. You're right. It's quite true. I remember now."

"Listen," said Nigel urgently. "How did you get this conflict? Did anyone say, at the time, you were a wicked girl? Your father?"

"Oh no. It was kept from him. Till after Oswald had disappeared."

"You're sure of that?"

"Certain."

"Someone else, then?"

"Need I talk about it any more?" she asked childishly.

"Yes. Just this one thing, my dear."

Mara sobbed weakly for a moment or two. Then she said, "After it happened, I ran away from him. Back to the house. Janet was there. I didn't want to talk to her, but she took hold of me; she dragged it out of me. I was frightened—she looked so angry when I told her. She kept on asking questions. Horrible questions. Details. Yes, she somehow made it seem as if it had been my fault. She made me feel I'd done something abominable. I think I'd have gone mad there and then if Robert hadn't come in. He stopped her. He was kind to me, like you've been. . . . Oh, listen! The lark has stopped singing!"

"He's done his work for the day. And a very good day's work."

"With some help from Mr. Strangeways." Mara grinned at him: a simple, impudent grin—not a trace of the delinquent-child look any more. "Oh dear, I suppose I'm working up to a crashing transference—isn't that what you call it? You'd better watch out!"

"Good Lord, this hasn't been a course of deep psychoanalysis, my dear! You did it yourself. We just chose the right moment, and you had the courage to call out a ghost and stand up to it."

"Yes," she said after a long silence, "I do love Lionel. Perhaps it'll be all right now. I'm going to bathe." She stood up in the canoe, stripping off her dress. There was a bathing suit beneath it. "After all, it must happen to thousands of people—adequately sexed girls anyway." Standing there before him, the glow of the late afternoon sun mellowing her white skin, she had never looked so un-self-conscious, or so sexless. She climbed down into the water and swam away.

"Of course," murmured Nigel, wearily shutting his eyes. "And good-by to a promising sculptor, maybe."

Presently Mara clambered out on to the bank. She asked Nigel to hand her towel and dress up to her. When, dried and clothed, she was back in the canoe, he asked what it was she had wanted to talk with him about privately.

She picked at a button of the velvet cushion. "It's all very difficult," she said irresolutely. "I'm not strong on filial feeling, but—" She took a deep breath and, turning her eyes away from Nigel, said, "Well, I think you ought to ask Rennell who he was talking to downstairs that night."

"The night Oswald was murdered?"

She nodded. "You said it might be important if someone else—if someone had seen him at Plash Meadow."

Gradually Nigel drew the facts from her. She had gone to bed at half-past eleven, leaving Rennell over a whisky bottle: he was well oiled, but not incapable. At about a quarter-past twelve, having been waked by the start of the thunderstorm, she heard voices from the studio below. All she could be sure of now was that they were men's voices and that one was her father's. They were speaking in low tones, not angrily. She assumed at the time that the other man was Robert Seaton. Afterward, when she knew Robert had been out walking, she thought the visitor must have been Lionel: but when she asked him, Lionel denied it. She had then asked her father, who laughed it off, saying he must have been talking to himself under the influence of drink. She had thought no more about it till the police investigation opened, several days later. The voices had stopped after five minutes, and she had thought she heard the French windows being opened and closed.

"Did they both go out?"

"No. Rennell didn't. At least, I presume he didn't. I heard someone moving about below, grunting a bit, like Rennell does, after the window was shut."

"But he didn't go up to bed then."

"No." Mara picked nervously at the button again. "I wouldn't have told you this if there seemed any real chance of its getting him into trouble. I mean, if the visitor *was* Oswald, he certainly left the studio alive."

"But Finny Black saw your father standing *outside* the French windows at about two o'clock."

"Well, *I* didn't hear him go out. And I was awake till—till after Finny found the head in the dairy. Besides, why should Rennell want to murder him?"

Nigel raised his eyebrows.

"To avenge my honor?" Mara laughed harshly. "Oh dear me, you don't know him if you think that. Besides, he could avenge it just as effectively by handing Oswald over to the police."

"Why didn't he?"

Mara looked rather confused. "It all happened so long ago. Of course, Rennell blustered a lot at the time. When he'd been told. But—"

"But he was making a good thing out of it? Free board and lodging?" said Nigel, with deliberate hardness.

The girl grimaced. "I suppose so. But, don't you see? Even taking that view of it, now that Oswald had reappeared, it was to Rennell's interest to keep him alive."

"Putting it bluntly, he could extract the hush money from Oswald instead of Robert now? Assuming that Oswald would get back the estate?"

"Yes. Does it seem awful, talking about one's father like this? He's not a bad sort really—just weak and lazy. And not a genius. Honestly, I don't think he blackmailed Robert. It was just that Robert felt he must make restitution for his brother."

Nigel offered no comment on this. He was trying to work out the implications of Mara's story. It would have been possible for Oswald to have reached Plash Meadow by a quarter-past twelve that night, or a little before. But why should he go first to the old barn? Either because Rennell had made an appointment with him, or because somebody else at Plash Meadow had done so and failed to keep it, or because at the last moment Oswald funked going straight to the house and decided to try out his resurrection on Rennell first. There was a fourth possibility—that the murderer had instructed Oswald to go to the old barn, in order to implicate Rennell Torrance.

The first explanation seemed the simplest. But it implied that it was Rennell whom Oswald had apprised about his return to England. And there were obvious snags about this.

"Look here, Mara, you've got to do some more remembering."

"It's getting cold," she said. Her eyes rested on him with misgiving.

"It was about half an hour after you heard the voices downstairs that you saw Robert and Janet cross the courtyard?"

"No, a quarter, more likely."

"But it was quarter to one when—"

"Oh hell, I've got so confused about the time. I honestly thought it was half-past twelve striking when I saw them. But the superintendent said someone saw Robert walking through the village fifteen minutes later, so it must have been quarter to one."

"But it seemed more like quarter than half an hour between the two things?"

"Well, yes, I must say it does."

"I wish to God we could get this timetable definite. However, you saw them by a flash of lightning. You're certain it *was* Janet?"

"Of course."

"Think hard. How was she dressed?"

"She had on a mackintosh, and a dress underneath it."

"How do you know there was a dress underneath?"

"Why, I could see it. Quite a bit of skirt showing below the bottom of the mackintosh."

"And Robert? What was he wearing?"

Mara knitted her brows. "I couldn't see him very well, because he was on the far side of Janet, and he's smaller than she is. A dark suit, I think."

"Not a mackintosh."

"No. I remember now thinking she must have borrowed his. I saw his arm swinging. Sort of dark cloth look. But I couldn't swear to it."

"Did he have a hat on?"

"I didn't notice."

"Hmm." Nigel became lost in thought, his unseeing eyes fixed upon Mara Torrance. Presently she said,

"I'm still here. And I'm getting colder than ever."

"What? Oh, yes. You must go back. There's absolutely nothing else you can remember about that night? However trivial it may seem? No mysterious sounds, movements, will-o'-the-wisps? Nothing?"

"No. . . . Yes! How silly of me! It was such a familiar sight, though—it never occurred to me—Robert was carrying a storm lantern. Your 'will-o'-the-wisps' reminded me. In the blackness after the lightning flash it showed for a moment—a faint glow: then they went out of my sight."

"Toward the dairy?"

"No. They were visiting Kitty's loose box, don't you remember?"

"Of course. And you stayed at the window for some time after that?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't see the storm lantern again?"

"No. I—oh!" It was a little wail of dismay. Mara bit her knuckles, staring at him with affrighted eyes. "Finny said there was a storm lantern in the dairy, lit. But that needn't mean anything bad, need it?"

"You go back now, my dear," said Nigel gently. "You can work this canoe?"

"Aren't you coming?"

"Not yet. I must walk over to Hinton Lacey. Would you be an angel and tell them I'll not be in for supper?"

Nigel climbed out of the canoe, and untied the mooring rope. Mara was sitting motionless, gazing in front of her. When she spoke, it was not what Nigel expected.

"Ought I to tell Lionel?" she asked, childishly.

"About the storm lantern? Well—"

"No, no! Damn the lantern! *You* can chase after that will-o'-the-wisp, if you like. I mean, about Oswald and me."

"Yes. But not yet. You don't want him to marry you out of pity, or to get it into his head that he's to be a sort of male nurse from now on. Wait till you've got quite accustomed in your own mind to what you've discovered about the Oswald incident today. There's bound to be a pretty severe reaction. You can't deny the truth to yourself all these years and expect everything to be straightforward once you've admitted it."

Nigel had been making a noose with the free end of the painter. He tossed it neatly over Mara's head and shoulders, then gave the canoe a push with his foot. When the girl had disengaged herself and knelt down by the starting handle, she looked up at him.

"You'll make it all right about the storm lantern, won't you?" she said, trying to smile . . .

Twenty minutes later, Nigel was talking with superintendent Blount. He gave him a résumé of Mara's information.

"So that's how they got Oswald out of the country," said Blount. "Compounding a felony. Hah!"

"Not so much of your 'they,' Blount! If Miss Torrance has given me the facts correctly, her father wasn't told about Oswald's nasty deed till after he'd 'committed suicide.' I'm pretty sure now he was not involved in the conspiracy of Oswald's disappearance. He may have suspected some hanky-panky about it: but I don't believe he had evidence on which he could blackmail the Seatons."

"You may be right. But the Seatons are in it, up to the neck, anyway."

"I disagree. My bet is that Janet Seaton arranged the whole thing, singlehanded. And you're safe to tell your chap down there—Inspector Slingsby, isn't it—to concentrate on her now."

"How d'you make that out?"

Nigel ticked the points off on his fingers. "First, Robert was a poor man and couldn't have had the necessary cash. Second, I believe he's an honorable man, and it would never have occurred to him to exploit Oswald's crime for his own benefit. Third, Oswald's 'suicide' would need a good deal of time, as well as money, to arrange. Now, from Mara's evidence, Robert was with her nearly all the time after the horrible thing happened, till Oswald disappeared. Janet was only with her at night. And Rennell Torrance told me that Janet had been pretty thick with Oswald those days—'ministering to him,' is how he put it. Putting the screws on him, *I* should call it. Fourth, it all fits in with what we know of Janet. She'd set her cap at Oswald and been rejected. Then she finds out what Oswald has done to Mara: salt in the wound, Blount. It's highly significant that she should have taken a violently censorious and nastily inquisitive line with the poor child that day. We won't labor the morbid psychology point—it's obvious. And, on top of that, she was a strong-minded, ambitious woman, with a monomania about her ancestral home. If Robert could come in for the property, *she* could get her hands on Robert, easy as pie. *And* she would. *And* she did. Q.E.D."

Blount vigorously massaged his bald head. "I've a mind to go down to Somerset tomorrow. I'll leave you and Bower to look after things here."

"Thank you very much."

"You'll not be up to any games?" said Blount, glancing at him severely. "That storm lantern, now. It looks bad."

"I presume you'd asked Robert Seaton how it came to be in the dairy?"

"He said he'd left it by the mare's loose box when they went out to look at her."

Nigel raised his eyebrows. "Well, perhaps he did. Somebody else may have used it later. The murderer. Or Oswald. Fingerprints?"

"It's been cleaned. Nothing suspicious about that, necessarily: Mrs. Seaton likes things kept kenspeckle. It's a queer thing about this case, incidentally, there being no fingerprints of the victim anywhere. Gates tried any number of likely surfaces early on, as you know. But—"

"It's all part and parcel of Oswald's caution. One keeps on forgetting that he was a criminal. He'd take damned good care not to touch anything, in case someone here ratted on him and he had to make a bolt for it again."

Superintendent Blount moved heavily across the room, sat down on the window seat and looked out at the evening sky. "There are times," he announced with a sigh, "when I find myself wondering if that laddie ever existed at all."

"Oswald?"

"Uh-huh."

"I know what you mean."

"A body. A head. And a dirty story. That's all he seems to amount to. If only we could trace his movements—fill in the picture a bit."

"You've not done badly, you know."

"It's the way, apart from the little matter of his head and body, he vanished without a trace. He gets out at a railway station, walks through a wood—and p'ff." Blount flicked his fingers.

"Good Lord!—One thing I quite forgot to tell you. Mara heard her father talking to a strange man at a quarter-past twelve that night."

Before Blount could speak, the innkeeper put his nose through the door to say that the superintendent was wanted on the telephone. Two minutes later, he returned. He said,

"That was Rennell Torrance. He wishes to make a statement."

Chapter 11

Lionel Seaton Overhears

The superintendent was not going to take Rennell Torrance's statement till next morning. "The reducing process" he called this. If Torrance was the guilty man, whether he intended to confess or to spin a yarn, the night's delay would get on his nerves: if not, the apparent negligence with which Blount had treated his message would be calculated to make him all the more forthcoming tomorrow, in an effort to impress the superintendent. Blount dispatched the long-suffering Sergeant Bower, however, to keep an eye on the old tithe barn during the night, just in case Torrance should change his mind and decide to make a run for it. He asked Nigel, on the general principle of keeping everyone on the jump, to let it be known at Plash Meadow, when he returned, that Torrance was making a statement next day.

"If any of 'em have a bad conscience, it'll stir 'em up," he said.

"Let's hope Bower stays awake then," remarked Nigel. "You'd look pretty silly if Torrance was liquidated tonight."

"I've every confidence in Sergeant Bower," said Blount, a little stiffly.

After he had left the superintendent, Nigel decided to look in on Paul Willingham. He found his friend sitting, elbow-deep in paper, at the parlor table.

"Homework," said Paul. "Give me ten minutes. There's some beer over there. And a bottle of Hollands, very expensive, very good for the liver."

Nigel poured himself a glass of Hollands, borrowed a sheet of paper and set to work on a timetable. He had already spent a lot of time trying to work out the movements of people on that Thursday night, but every timetable seemed to have more gaps and question marks than the last. However, with what he had heard from Finny Black and Mara today, a few gaps might be filled in.

Farmyard noises strayed agreeably through the open window as he worked. Presently Paul muttered,

"Now for P.A.Y.E. Then I'll be finished."

He flipped through the tax tables and set to working out the weekly deductions for his farm hands. When he had finished, he put down the

Biro pen with which he had been making the entries, took out a checkbook and rummaged among the papers on the table.

"What are you looking for?" asked Nigel.

"My dip pen."

"Biro run out?"

"No, but I want to sign a check."

"I don't get you."

"Well," said Paul abstractedly, "I was going to sign a check with the old Biro at a travel agency last year, and the bloke asked me to use another pen. It was the agency's checkbook. He said the old Biro left an impression on the check below the one you're actually writing on; so a criminal type could come along and ink in your signature on the next check form and draw himself a few hundred or thousand smackers as the case might be. Ah, here it is! So, seeing as you're in the room, I thought I'd better be on the safe side."

"You make life very complicated for yourself."

Paul Willingham put check and deduction cards into an envelope and sealed it up.

"Well, how's your murder going?" he asked, pouring beer into his tankard.

Nigel gave him a brief synopsis, leaving out Mara Torrance's private affairs.

"What do you think?" he said at the end of it.

"Obviously the work of a gang," was Paul's cheerful comment.

Nigel buried his head in his hands and groaned.

"A gang of mysterious Orientals, I suppose?"

"No, no. I'm quite serious. I've been giving the matter some thought. It's like this, Nigel. Let's agree for the sake of argument, that Oswald was carved up in the dairy. Now, look what had to be done. First, he had to be got into the dairy: then his throat cut: then his clothes removed: then his head to be severed from his body: then a net bag provided to put the head in, with the idea of carrying it away and hiding it somewhere: then the body had to be wrapped up in his mackintosh, conveyed to the river and presumably towed some way downstream by a strong swimmer: then the bundle of clothes had to be hidden in the church vault, and the dairy sluiced down. Not necessarily in that order, of course. Have I left anything out?"

"I don't think so. You might have been there yourself."

"Plus a few oddments—going through the pockets of the clothes to see there was nothing incriminating in them; cleaning the tools and putting 'em back, or hiding 'em. All took time, old man. More time than any one person could afford. Besides, who kept *cave?* Can you see anyone going through all those motions, even at night, even if he'd planned every detail beforehand, without another chap to keep watch? The risk'd be appalling. That's why I say it was a gang."

"Yes, the thought of two people being involved had occurred to me."

"And then," said Paul, warning to his work, "have you considered the significance of the blood trail?"

"But there wasn't a blood trail."

"That's what is so significant, old boy. I don't believe one man could cart a recently decapitated corpse from the dairy to the river without leaving blood spots, even granted that the top of the mac was well buttoned over the neck."

"The rain might have washed the blood spots away, you know. And anyway, the corpse wouldn't have been bleeding any more by then. But I agree, it'd have been much simpler if there had been two people to carry the body."

"Good-oh! I'm glad you've come round to my way of thinking."

"But *what* two people?" asked Nigel, a worried look on his face. "There aren't many possible permutations and combinations at Plash Meadow. I can't conceive any two of them planning such an elaborate affair. Robert and Janet? Lionel and Mara? Rennell and Robert? Lionel and Janet? Mara and Rennell? And so on. Take your pick: but none of the possible partnerships makes sense to me."

"You're obsessed by the number two, old boy," said Paul, waving his pipestem airily at Nigel. "Why shouldn't the whole lot of them have organized it? This Oswald was a menace to 'em all, in various degrees, wasn't he?"

Nigel nodded.

"Well then? The whole squadron was laid on for Operation Oswald. And a very good job they seem to have made of it—or would have, if Finny hadn't gone skirmishing out into the middle of it. And very sorry I'd be to see any of 'em taken up for the job."

"No, no, Paul. Don't let's make the thing more fantastic than we need. People don't commit murder in a shoal. Other crimes, yes. But not murder."

"I expect you're right," said Paul, a faraway look in his eyes. "But isn't murder always unreal? You remember Robert talking about the flash point, that day we went to tea? Well, either you've planned your murder in fantasy, brooded over every detail beforehand, thought of your alibi and so on, or else it's unpremeditated—a moment of madness. But, in a way, they're both the same. There can't be degrees of murder, because there's no such thing as a cold-blooded murderer. There's only a different flash point. The chap who plans a murder never really means to commit it. Generally he never gets further than the planning: there must be thousands of murders committed in fantasy every year. But just now and then the point is reached where the fantasies take charge and push the bloke over the edge. What I say is, this bloke is no more responsible for his action than if he'd struck down a total stranger in a moment of blind rage."

"I don't agree with you. But it's very interesting."

"That's why I say all murder is unreal. Or put it like this—every murder is a case of possession: instantaneous or gradual doesn't matter. The murderer is possessed by something not himself—by a stranger within—which compels him to do violence to himself no less than he does it to his victim. And afterward—do you know, I can imagine myself having murdered someone and a year later genuinely not being sure whether it was a dream or a reality. Once the wound caused to myself by the self-violence had healed over—and nature'd do that quickly enough—I'd go about my affairs as innocently as any other citizen."

Nigel was pondering Paul Willingham's words as he walked back to Ferry Lacey. He had had supper at the farm and arranged that Paul should invite Vanessa Seaton to stay there if affairs at Plash Meadow took the ugly turn which Nigel feared. Paul had been talking through his hat, of course, he reflected now. But he had indirectly put his finger, once again, on a crucial point.

Premeditation or not? Assume that Oswald Seaton's murder was premeditated. What follows? First, the killer must know some little time before that Oswald is alive and back in England. Second, if the killer knows about the Oswald-Mara affair, he can be sure that Oswald will conceal his own identity out of self-protection. Now the only people at Plash Meadow who did not know about that affair were Finny Black, Vanessa and perhaps Lionel. Vanessa could be eliminated: Finny would be mentally incapable of planning a murder: Lionel would have no motive for it *unless* he had discovered the Oswald-Mara secret. Thirdly, a killer acquainted with this secret would have, so to speak, the ideal victim—a man believed to be dead years ago, a man who dare not reveal his own identity. Then *why,* it struck Nigel now with irresistible force, *why murder him at Plash Meadow,* the one place in the world where there would be a danger of the "body of an unknown man" being associated with the Oswald Seaton of ten years ago? It seemed to follow, with the most unassailable logic, that because Oswald was murdered at Plash Meadow, his murder could not have been premeditated.

At once the whole complicated and unsatisfactory mosaic of the case showed a different pattern to Nigel. A premeditated crime had been unthinkable, unless motivated by the desire either for security or for revenge on the murderer's part. But an unpremeditated one opened up new possibilities—a sudden quarrel, for instance, or an accident; or even, it strangely occurred to Nigel, sheer fright—the shock of seeing, on that lurid, storming night, one whom the killer might have every reason for believing a ghost . . .

At ten o'clock the next morning, Nigel strolled across to the old barn. He had waked early, to find a certain phrase ringing in his head almost as if it had just been spoken into his sleeping ear. "We all had Oswald on our minds just then." Rennell Torrance had given this as an explanation for the horror he had shown when confronted by Mara's clay head of Robert. As Nigel had pointed out, much to Rennell's discomfiture, this statement did not make sense, because it had not been known at the time, except presumably to the murderer, that the murdered man was Oswald. Now, if it turned out that Rennell had seen Oswald on the fatal night, his alarm at the likeness of the portrait head would be explained. But, "we all had Oswald on our minds just then"—was that "all" merely a defensive turn of phrase? or could it by any chance be the truth, supporting Paul Willingham's absurd suggestion that everyone at Plash Meadow had been in a conspiracy to remove Oswald?

No, thought Nigel, this won't do: I convinced myself last night that Oswald's murder was unpremeditated. Well the *murder* might have been, but the elaborate effort to conceal it could still have been a communal one. Lack of premeditation does not imply that there was no conspiracy. How many of them, then, were accomplices after the fact? It must have been pretty soon after the fact, too. "Oh bosh, it's fantastic," he muttered to himself, remembering the pleasant family breakfast he had taken only an hour ago—Lionel and Vanessa mildly chaffing each other; Janet Seaton discussing plans for the day, for a picnic up the river; her husband, at the head of the table, smiling at his children, talking to Nigel about Paul Willingham, then leaving his coffee half finished to slip upstairs and resume work on the poem which impatiently awaited him. None of them seemed apprehensive, or even curious, about the statement which, as Nigel had told them the previous night, Rennell Torrance was to make this morning. Their only worry appeared to be the weather, which was clouding over and threatening the projected picnic. As Nigel entered the old barn, a few drops of rain began to fall.

Superintendent Blount was already there, with one of Inspector Gates' men who had come to relieve Sergeant Bower. Blount had cleared a space on one of the littered tables in the studio. Rennell Torrance, slumped in a basket chair, pointedly ignored Nigel as he entered. The sound of a vacuum cleaner could be heard from upstairs, Rennell's flamboyant and shoddy canvases blushed hotly on the walls, relics of a misspent life.

"We'd better begin," said Blount, and administered the official caution.

It was like a major operation, thought Nigel, so masked and impersonal was Blount's method, so tense the atmosphere, so like an anesthetized patient's the flaccid, deadwhite face of Rennell Torrance. A surgical operation to extract a piece of truth which had been poisoning the patient's system. "On the night of Thursday the——" The "statement" proceeded, question and answer, question and answer, with infuriating deliberateness.

Rennell Torrance had been sitting up late that night, Mara having gone to bed. About ten minutes after midnight he heard a light tap at the French windows: they were not locked: they opened and a man came in. For a moment he did not recognize him—Rennell admitted he'd been a bit fuddled with drink, and besides, he'd never seen Oswald Seaton without a beard before. No, he'd not been expecting Oswald: why, damn it, how could he, when to the best of everyone's knowledge, Oswald had been dead these ten years? No, he had not been in communication with him. You could have knocked him down with a feather when Oswald had appeared.

"Yes, it's me," were Oswald's first words. "Back from the dead. Quite a nuisance for everyone, I reckon. What about a drink? I've had a long walk."

"Help yourself. But where the devil did you spring from?"

Rennell noticed that Oswald did not take off his gloves as he poured out the drink.

"As you know very well, I did not commit suicide," Oswald had proceeded. "I knocked around the world a bit, changed my name, was working in Malaya when the Japs came in. Prison camp for three years. I'm not all that afraid of prison now, Torrance. I suggest you and I let bygones be bygones. You won't find me less charitable than my dear brother. I'll rely on you to keep—what's her name?—Mara quiet."

Nigel noticed that by an eerie coincidence, the sound of the vacuum cleaner overhead stopped at this instant. Gazing through the French windows, he saw that the rain had begun in earnest: Janet Seaton, in a long dark-blue mackintosh, was walking down the drive away from the house. Nigel turned his eyes back to Rennell Torrance.

"I realized," he was saying, "that Oswald was convinced I'd known all along his suicide was phony, and believed I'd been blackmailing Robert ever since."

"Was there any truth in that?" asked Blount.

"Good Lord no. Ask Robert if you don't believe me. Mara told me last night she'd talked about Oswald to Strangeways. So you know why he left the country."

"What happened next?"

"I told him he'd a bloody nerve to come in here, and he'd better get out double-quick before I gave him the soundest thrashing of his life. I said he'd ruined my daughter's life and I'd a good mind to hand him over to the police straight away."

"Why didn't you?"

"Well, I didn't like the way he put his right hand in his mackintosh pocket at that point. I was afraid he had a gun in it." The painter's heavy body shifted uneasily.

"Did he actually threaten you?"

"No. Not exactly. But—"

"But he pointed out, perhaps," Nigel put in, "that his return—even if you did inform the police about what had happened to Mara—would kill the goose that laid your golden eggs? Robert would lose the estate."

"Well, he hinted something of the sort," muttered Rennell at last, with very bad grace.

It dawned upon Nigel that Oswald had come first to the old barn in order to have a witness of his existence. He might also have hoped to strike a bargain with Rennell Torrance: but the main point of his visit was that he should be able to say in effect, if he ran into bad trouble later at Plash Meadow, "Keep your hands off me, don't think you've got the perfect victim for a murder, somebody else knows I was here, alive, at a quarter-past twelve tonight." He had preferred the risk of being exposed by Rennell, whom he obviously despised, to the risk he might incur from —from whom? Who was the X. at Plash Meadow that this dangerous and desperate man so feared? Or was it just in Oswald's nature to mistrust everyone?

"Did he suggest to you why he'd come back to England at all?" Blount was asking. "Did he say who'd invited him?"

"No, but he seemed cocky enough. I couldn't make it out. As though he were sitting pretty, somehow."

"What gave you that impression?"

"Well, after I'd ordered him out, he said 'O.K. But I'll be seeing a lot of you from now on, if things go right.' Then he paused a moment, and then he said, 'Robert always was a bit soft: he'll be glad to see me, even if you aren't. Blood's thicker than water.' "

Superintendent Blount now took Torrance back over the ground, trying to discover fragments of information he had overlooked. But the result seemed entirely negative. Oswald had said nothing more to Torrance about where he'd come from, or why he'd returned to England when he did. The painter had obviously been three-quarters crocked, what with drink and fright; and Oswald had only stayed in the studio, he reckoned, seven to ten minutes.

As Blount plugged away, Nigel's attention wandered again. Framed in the French windows, the west corner of Plash Meadow looked—there was only the French word for it—*morne.* The slanting rain, the tattered clouds drifting low overhead, the wind nagging at leaves and roses: summer was going, the garden wept inconsolably. The fairy-tale house, so unreal when first he had seen it, was still less real today: then it had been the fabulous exuberance of its roses, the trance of high summer; now it was as if Plash Meadow, having drunk too deep of horrors, suffered from a blighting hangover.

Abruptly Nigel checked his thoughts. Ridiculous. That damned house seemed able to impose its moods upon one. But the real truth of the matter was that, like the poet working away now under its roof, it had the knack of intensifying, of illuminating whatever mood one happened to be in, of adapting itself to each different personality. Which of its Protean selves had it offered to Oswald Seaton that night, Nigel wondered. But Oswald himself was still a hopelessly unreal figure; nor did Rennell Torrance's statement help in the least to bring him alive. It was likely enough that Rennell was telling the truth now: but the truth was not enough—not his kind of truth, anyway, thought Nigel, scrutinizing the painter's flabby, defeated face, the body slumped in the chair like a sack from which all meaning had leaked out long ago.

Something was fidgeting at Nigel's mind, like the wind teasing the tarnished roses outside. Through the web of question-and-answer, question-and-answer that Blount and Torrance were interminably spinning, Nigel became aware of a silence. Somewhere in the background, like an attentive eavesdropper holding his breath, stood this silence. Well, of course, the vacuum cleaner stopped some time ago. But surely Mara had not finished her housework then? Surely one ought to be able to hear her moving about overhead? Or, if she has finished upstairs, why has she not come down?—there is only this one staircase, leading down from the minstrel gallery. Well, thought Nigel, she's probably up there, listening to what we're saying: not great harm in that.

"So then he left this room," Blount prompted. "Did you see him out?"

"Not exactly. I didn't like to go too near him. But, when he'd stepped outside, I went to the French window. I shut it behind him and stayed looking out for a few moments."

"Did you see where he went?"

"He must have walked over to the house. At least, I saw him once again. There was a long shake of sheet lightning, and I noticed him quite near the courtyard door over there."

"Did you see who let him in?"

"No. But I assumed he must have got into the house somehow, because when the next flash of lightning came, he wasn't visible any more."

" 'Not visible any more,' " muttered the constable who was taking it all down.

"Very well. What did you do then?" asked Blount, keeping his stride like a tireless runner. Rennell Torrance mopped his forehead: his head rolled wearily and jerked upright again, as if he'd been on the verge of sleep.

"I locked the windows, sat down again, had some more drink. Felt I couldn't go to bed yet. I was uneasy. I wanted to puzzle things out. To tell you the truth," he went on in a sleepwalking kind of voice, "I began to wonder after a bit if I hadn't dreamed it all. I simply couldn't get used to the idea of Oswald being alive."

"And then?"

"Well, after a bit I went to bed," Torrance replied lamely.

"How do you account, then, for Finny Black's statement that he saw you standing outside the French windows at—" Blount deliberately thumbed through a sheaf of papers "—at about two o'clock?"

Torrance seemed too exhausted even for a spurt of righteous indignation. Wearily he said,

"I went to bed *after* that. I just wanted a breath of fresh air. That's all."

"Did you go for a walk?"

"No. I stood outside the window for a few minutes. I told you all this last time."

"Just so. But you didn't tell me last time I questioned you that Oswald Seaton had paid you a visit." There was a slight edge on Blount's voice. "Have you—e'eh—remembered anything else since? Anything you forgot to tell me then?"

"No."

It was the first time that Nigel got the impression Rennell was keeping something back. His denial came too pat—a trace of defiance in it. The same idea must have occurred to Blount, for he treated Rennell to a prolonged, steady stare and a silence that positively bristled with incredulity. As he waited for this treatment to take effect upon the painter, Nigel, lying back in his chair, idly cast his eyes upward.

He was sitting just below the edge of the gallery. His eye caught a dark metal object protruding from between two of the banisters which supported the rail of the gallery, at its far end. It took Nigel three full seconds to realize that this object was the muzzle of a revolver. During that space, Rennell Torrance burst out in weak exasperation, "What d'you want me to say?"—and the muzzle up there tilted down so that it seemed to be pointing at the back of the painter's head.

"I just want you to tell the truth. Did you not see anyone moving about as you stood outside the French windows? Did you see Mr. and Mrs. Seaton, for instance, searching for Finny Black?"

"Well, as you ask me—"

"Stop!"

"Stop!"

Fantastically, Nigel's warning shout was echoed by a fierce command from the gallery above. Superintendent Blount was on his feet. Nigel sprang into the middle of the studio, and stood between Rennell Torrance and the long-barreled Mauser pistol which Lionel Seaton, lying flat on the gallery floor, his face visible between the bars, was sighting at the group below.

"Don't be a young fool!" said Blount sharply. "Put that gun down at once!"

Lionel Seaton ignored him. "I'm talking to you, Torrance. You've said enough. D'you understand me? Quite enough. I've been listening. If you say a word more, now or at any time, I'll come back and knock you off."

Involuntarily Nigel had moved a little away from Rennell's chair. The painter, gray faced and shaking, had screwed his head round when Lionel began to speak: now he had slid off the chair and was groveling behind it. Lionel Seaton's eyes blazed at him from between the bars. He spoke again,

"You see that bloody awful picture over there?"

Four pairs of eyes switched in the direction pointed by a wave of the Mauser in Lionel's hand—a self-portrait by Rennell Torrance, hanging on the wall to the left of the French windows.

"Now look, Torrance. This is what will happen to you if—"

There was a stunning explosion. Lionel Seaton had hardly seemed to take aim at all; but a black hole appeared in the dead center of the greenish-white forehead of the self-portrait. Rennell Torrance whimpered.

"Now!" exclaimed Blount, and dashed heroically for the foot of the staircase, followed by the constable. Nigel, hard on their heels, suddenly checked himself. Whipping round, he saw Mara Torrance at the French windows. Before he could get there, she had opened them, withdrawn the key and locked them from outside. Nigel ran out of the studio, catching a glimpse as he went of Blount falling over a heavy chair which Lionel had bowled down the staircase at him. The front door of the old barn had been locked from the outside too. The pair had planned it pretty well. Mara had, no doubt, climbed out of her bedroom window down a ladder, locked the front door, then waited for Lionel's signal—the revolver shot —to lock the French windows while the attention of those in the studio was concentrated on Lionel.

"Silly young asses!" muttered Nigel as he went upstairs. "Are there any duplicate keys?" he called to Rennell over his shoulder.

"No. Afraid not. Look here, what on earth is Mara up to? You've got to stop her."

Upstairs, Blount and the constable charged Mara's door. The lock splintered and they tumbled into the bedroom. The window was open. A ladder lay on the ground below. Lionel could hardly have had time to climb down it. He must have jumped, and then pulled the ladder away from beneath. But Lionel had been trained to this sort of thing as an officer in the Airborne Forces: neither Blount nor the constable could risk a twenty-foot jump.

They ran out, colliding with Nigel in the doorway. As they got to the French windows, a car whirled past down the drive. Lionel Seaton waved gaily. Mara Torrance was beside him. By the time Blount had borrowed a chisel and forced the lock of the French windows, they were well away.

"They won't get far," said Blount grimly. "I'm going across to telephone. Wait here for me."

Five minutes later, he was back. "Now then, Mr. Torrance," he said, "we'll go on from the point where we were—e'eh—interrupted." He cocked an eye at the constable, who turned to his notebook and unemotionally recited.

" 'Did you see Mr. and Mrs. Seaton, for instance, searching for Finny Black?' . . . 'Well, as you ask me—' "

In the interval, Rennell Torrance had put down a couple of strong whiskies, and his nerve was somewhat restored. He began to bluster.

"Look here, Superintendent, this is outrageous! I'm threatened by a young lunatic with a pistol; my daughter runs away; and the best you can do is to—"

"One thing at a time, Mr. Torrance. You were about to tell us that you saw suspicious movements at two o'clock that morning, weren't you?"

A look of bleary cunning came over the painter's face.

"You're trying to catch me out, eh? Don't care for your methods. It was at *one* o'clock, wasn't it, that Robert and Janet went out to look for Finny? So how could I have seen them at two o'clock?"

"Whom did you see then?"

Rennell's eye wandered to the self-portrait on the wall, with the hole in its forehead.

"I didn't see anyone. I can't see in the dark, you know. The lightning had stopped by then."

"You should take no account of Lionel Seaton's threats. If it proves necessary, we shall give you protection." Blount loomed formidably over the painter. "And I must warn you that you're already in a very awkward position for having withheld this evidence about Oswald Seaton. I should strongly recommend you to conceal nothing more."

"But I'm *not* concealing anything," Rennell answered in the tones of a pettish child. "I was going to tell you, when we were interrupted, that I *heard* something. I heard footsteps crossing the courtyard away to my left, from the direction of the orchard; then I heard the door of the servants' quarters open and shut. Presumably it was Finny Black I heard."

Rennell Torrance stuck on this, and nothing Blount could do would shift him. Nigel found it impossible to decide whether he had told the truth or not.

Presently Nigel and Blount were chatting in the shelter of the summerhouse.

"I'd like to know what that young fool is playing at," the superintendent growled. "He's scared the daylights out of Torrance, anyway, blast him!"

"What are your ideas?"

"Well, I suppose he silenced Torrance at that point either to protect himself or somebody else. And the exhibitionistic way he chose to do it could only draw suspicion on him. No, I fancy he thought Torrance was just going to let out something about Mr. and Mrs. Seaton. Maybe he was, too."

"There's a third possibility. All that play acting—if Lionel wanted Torrance to keep his mouth shut, he could surely have found an opportunity to threaten him, on the quiet, last night or early this morning. What I think is that he's playing for time: he wants to divert your mind from—"

"Damn it!" exploded Blount. "Is this what you were hinting at yesterday afternoon? 'Another crop of mysterious occurrences'? Nothing mysterious about those two holding us up with a pistol. Time for what, anyway?"

"Time for verse, Blount."

"Now look here, Strangeways, this case is crazy enough already without your—"

"I'm quite serious. The most important thing in this household is Robert Seaton's poetry. Recently he has begun writing something which, for all we know, may be his masterpiece. We've got to think in terms of values utterly different from the normal man's, while we're dealing with this case. The Seatons—and Mara too, I believe—are people for whom art is infinitely more important than any police investigation. More real, if you like. For Robert's poetry, they will go to any lengths and be prepared to sacrifice anything."

"You're not telling me Oswald Seaton was murdered for the sake of his brother's poetry? I can't swallow that."

"It's not impossible. But my point is this: young Lionel may or may not have reason to suspect that his father was involved in the murder; but he *knows* that, sooner or later, there'll be a showdown, and he wants to postpone it as long as possible, so that his father may finish the work he's engaged on. So Lionel stages this diversion in force. He wants you to waste time and suspicion on him. That's why he told us it was he who'd hidden Finny Black in the vault and kept him supplied with food."

"All I can say is, if you seriously believe that, you'd believe anything. People don't behave like that in real life. Why, it'd be the vairy lunacy of quixotism!"

"The young are quixotic, sometimes, to the point of lunacy. And it's not pure quixotism on Lionel's part. Mara's whole attitude toward him changed when she began to suspect he was putting himself in danger on Robert's behalf: and she'd do anything for Robert herself. Incidentally, Blount, if you want to find them quickly, I suggest you warn all Registry Offices." Nigel's eyes strayed over the entrancing lines of Plash Meadow. "You talk of real life, Blount. Look at that house. Don't you wonder sometimes if it won't vanish, like a dream, between one moment and the next?"

"No," said Blount. "Frankly, the notion has never occurred to me. But I'll bear your other suggestions in mind."

"Hurrah for bonny Scotland!"

Blount's mouth twitched with faint amusement. "Will you hold the fort here? You'll have to tell Mr. Seaton about his son. I must away to Redcote to see Gates. Then I may go down to Bristol for a night. I'll be leaving Bower here."

"So you're *not* going to chase Lionel and Mara all over the countryside in a fast car?"

"Och, there'll be no trouble pulling them in," said the superintendent—a prediction which was to prove curiously wide of the mark.

Chapter 12

Nigel Strangeways Inquires

It was typical of what Plash Meadow stood for, thought Nigel as he walked upstairs toward Robert Seaton's study, that he should feel a strong reluctance to interrupt the poet's meditations with the mere announcement that his son was a fugitive from justice. However, he tapped on the door and marched bravely in. At his desk, Robert Seaton was bending over one of the little black notebooks, in a pose so rigid, so attentive that Nigel almost expected to see some jeweled flower or insect come fabulously burrowing up out of the blank page before his eyes. The poet sat for a minute or two, as if hypnotized by the white sheet: then he wrote a few words, paused, altered one, altered it again, turned back to the previous page and crossed something out; then sat back with a sigh.

"I'm terribly sorry to break in like this," said Nigel, "but something has happened."

Robert Seaton's eyes encountered him at last. They seemed to have some difficulty in focusing him. Nigel got the impression of a gaze which had been embracing vistas infinitely far above and beyond him, now essaying to pinpoint a tiny object somewhere in the vast panorama. Words of an old jazz song came absurdly into his head: "You can't see a fly upon a mountain, The distance interferes with the view."

"My dear chap, come in, sit down," said Robert warmly. "I must apologize for being so inattentive. What were you saying? Something happened?"

Nigel told him. The poet sat there, a worried frown upon his face, raising his eyebrows when Nigel came to the bullet hole in Rennell's self-portrait.

"Oh dear me," said Robert at last. "He shouldn't have done that." The intonation was precisely that of a person gracefully accepting a too-expensive present. He ruminated for a few moments. "Have you told my wife?"

"She went down the village. I'll tell her when she comes back. Unless you'd rather."

"Please do. Very good of you. . . . Well, I'll be jiggered! And Mara too? I say, d'you think those two are going to hit it off now?" The poet gleefully rubbed his hands, then clasped them again on the desk.

"I shouldn't be surprised. If a spell in quod doesn't cool them off."

"Oh poof! A boyish escapade. Surely—I say, Strangeways, it's not going to put any foolish ideas into your superintendent's head, I hope?"

Nigel was accustomed by now to the Plash Meadow style of reference, as though Blount were some large dog over which Nigel had only imperfect control.

"Even Blount's patience is not unlimited," he replied. "And he can't just ignore it when Lionel terrorizes a witness at the crucial point of his evidence."

"No, I suppose not. But your superintendent's an intelligent man. He must realize that no murderer would behave like that," said Robert Seaton with admirable good sense.

"Blount would tell you, from long experience, that it's quite impossible to predicate anything about the ways of murderers."

" 'Predicate.' Good. How refreshing it is to have someone in the house with a wide vocabulary. D'you know, Strangeways, I read the Oxford dictionary every day. The only book a poet really requires."

"Still going well, is it?" asked Nigel, with a glance at the open notebook.

"Pretty well, thanks."

"How much longer will it take?"

The poet gave him an odd look, half-questioning, half of complicity. "Ah yes, that's the point, isn't it? It's turned into a sequence, and there never seems any reason why a sequence should stop—" he grinned delightfully "—though there's every reason why some sequences should never have been started. Yes. Tell you the truth, I've never written so fast in my life. Extraordinary." He peered dubiously at the notebook. "But it seems all right. . . . How much longer, you asked? Well, how much longer have I?"

Nigel found his breath quite taken away by this last remark. He positively gaped at Robert Seaton, whose eyes were fixed upon him now with an expression of singular sagacity.

"What I mean is, sooner or later something'll have to be done about poor Oswald's death, won't it?"

Nigel swallowed convulsively, and suggested that quite a lot was already being done in this matter.

"Yes, yes, of course. But even if it turns out that none of us here is implicated in the murder, there's still going to be a shocking schlemazel, I'm afraid, about his original disappearance—you know, when he was supposed to have drowned himself. I don't know what the position will be about this property. But, once all that has blown up, I can't see myself writing any more for a long, long time. It'll be very hard on poor Janet if we have to leave."

Nigel gave it up. "You wouldn't read me some, would you?" he asked.

"Why not?" Robert Seaton opened a drawer. "Here's my fair copy. Mm. This passage, perhaps. Yes, I think you'll like this. . . ."

After the poet had stopped reading, Nigel sat in silence for a little, the tears drying on his cheeks.

"Good? My word, it is! It's—it's worth everything."

It was good. It was the tongue of men and of angels.

Nigel went away to his own room, where he sat for quarter of an hour, seeing nothing, Robert Seaton's angelic verse still ringing in his head. "Glory be!" he muttered at last; then, sighing, took out the timetable he had worked on at Paul's last night, made a couple more entries in it, and pored over the result.

1. 10:58	Train from Bristol arrived Chillingham	Stationmaster
2. 11:15	Oswald seen by drunk on road 1 m. from Chillingham	Drunk
3. "Not long before midnight"	Oswald seen by Jack Whitford in Foxhole Wood	J. Whitford
4. "Soon after midnight"	Thunder*storm* begins.	Mara *et al.*
	Janet goes to Finny's room; finds him asleep.	Janet
5. 12:10	Oswald turns up at old barn	Rennell/Mara
6. 12:20	Oswald walks across to Plash Meadow	Rennell
7. 12:30	Thunder*shower* begins	Mara/Gardener
(?) 12:30	Janet and Robert cross courtyard	Mara/Janet and Robert

	But 12:45 approx.	Expectant father sees Robert walk down road	Expectant father
8.	12:55	Robert and Janet seen crossing courtyard again "after thundershower."	Vanessa
9.	About 1:00	Second thunderstorm	Gardener
	(?) 1:00	Half hour after Robert's return; Janet finds Finny is missing: she and R. search for him.	Janet and Robert
10.	1:05–1:20	A heavier thundershower begins.	Gardener
		R. and J. go in again	R. and J.
11.	About 1:20	Second thundershower ends	Gardener
12.	2:00 approx.	Finny turns up "drenched to skin."	Janet
		He has just seen Rennell outside French windows	Finny

The old problem remained—what time did Robert Seaton get back from his walk? Nigel stared at the contradictions, so sharply posed by his timetable. Mara had at first been sure it was 12:30 when she'd seen Robert and Janet cross the courtyard: they had confirmed this time themselves. On the other hand, the evidence of the expectant father put Robert's return at 12:45; and Mara admitted she might have been wrong about the quarter the clock had just struck. Then again, there was the discrepancy between items eight and nine. Vanessa had looked at her watch when she'd seen her father and mother outside, and it was 12:55. According to *their* evidence, they had gone out to look for Finny about half an hour after Robert's return: if he had not returned till 12:45, this would put their search at 1:15, and there was surely too great a discrepancy between this and Vanessa's 12:55. But, if Robert had returned at 12:30 you only needed to make his "about half an hour" into twenty-five minutes, and the time of the search for Finny fitted with Vanessa's evidence; also, Mara's first statement would be vindicated.

The weight of evidence seemed to be on the side of Robert's having returned at 12:30. Yet Nigel was not entirely satisfied. Since there was no knowing when Oswald had been killed, it is true a quarter of an hour one way or the other seemed to make no difference. But Nigel couldn't rid his mind of the statement made by the expectant father, for this witness was the only disinterested one—Robert, Janet and Mara *might* have a reason for falsifying the time of Robert's return. Well, then, said Nigel to himself, let us take the hypothesis that Robert did not get back till 12:45—what conceivable reason could he have for asserting that it had been 12:30? And Janet and Mara for backing him up?

Nigel racked his brains, but in vain, for a good ten minutes. Then he turned back to the other problem raised by his timetable. What time had it been when Finny Black found the head in the diary, hid it in the chestnut tree and soon after heard footsteps coming up from the river? Oswald was still alive at 12:30. Supposing even that he'd been killed the next minute, after entering the house—but no, that wouldn't do, Gates and Blount were certain he had not been murdered there. Well then, he had to be persuaded into the diary, his throat cut, his clothes and head removed, his body taken down to the river. It did not seem possible that all this could be done in much less than half an hour. Say, then, 12:50 as the earliest Finny could have found head, bundle of clothes, but no body in the dairy. All he himself could say was that there had been thunder and lightning, but no rain, at the time; and it seemed reasonable to assume that the footsteps he had heard were those of the murderer returning from putting the body in the river. The first thundershower had begun at 12:30 and was over before 12:55, when Vanessa had noticed the glass gleaming wet "after a shower." The second thunder*storm* had begun about one o'clock and five to ten minutes later a heavier thundershower had followed. It looked, then, as Finny had made his discovery somewhere between one o'clock and ten after one. But in that case it was perfectly possible that the footsteps he heard might be those of Robert and Janet searching for him.

Finny Black's evidence was, in fact, perfectly useless. But, according to Janet, he had returned about two o'clock "drenched to the skin." On the theory that the murder was unpremeditated—an act of sheer fright, perhaps—might not Finny have done it after all? Might he not have been drenched to the skin because he had been towing the body out into the river? No, that wouldn't do: Lionel Seaton had categorically stated that

Finny couldn't swim. Of course, he might have been lying. But why? It could easily be verified, anyway.

Nigel's eye wandered despondently to the window, where beads of rain were sliding down. And at that moment, all unprompted, an answer to his first question came. At first sight, it was an answer so shocking and so bizarre that his imagination rejected it with a sense of outrage. But it would not be denied. The longer he examined it, the more stringently he tested it against the whole body of evidence in the case, the stronger its claims appeared. After half an hour's concentrated thought, Nigel was finally convinced that he knew why Robert Seaton asserted he had returned to Plash Meadow at 12:30 on the fatal night.

But there was still something missing—a link which would complete the chain of reasoning. Nigel knew he had been given this link, perhaps without recognizing it; now he had mislaid it. Something had happened during Blount's examination of Rennell Torrance this morning—was it something heard? or seen?—which would clinch the whole theory. But, try as he would, he could not recapture the elusive thing. And ruefully he admitted to himself that his failure to do so must spring from a deep repugnance for the truth which had forced itself upon him. Desperately, like Jacob wrestling with the angel, his mind struggled to throw off the grip of this overmastering truth. But it was no good. . . . No villain need be. Oswald Seaton was a villain, though. And villainy breeds villainy; corruption corrupts, no one is safe. That's not the point, though—how does it go?—

'Tis morning: but no morning can restore
What we have forfeited. I see no sin:
The wrong is mixed. In tragic life, God wot,
No villain need be! Passions spin the plot:
We are betrayed by what is false within.

But what words are there for the tragedy of one betrayed by what is true within? for the predicament of one destroyed by the war within of two good causes?

The door opened, and Janet Seaton came in, to stand over Nigel's chair like a dark, accusing angel of judgment.

"What's this I hear about Lionel?"

"You've heard? Did Robert tell you?"

"It's all over the village. Surely you could have prevented it?"

"Well, we tried. But—do sit down, won't you?"

Mrs. Seaton ignored it: Nigel had got up and was standing by the mantelpiece. He described briefly what had happened in the old barn.

"I suppose it might have been worse. The talk in the village is that he shot Mr. Torrance and wounded a policeman. We shall never live this down. What could have possessed the boy to behave like that?"

"The police would naturally conclude that he wished to stop Rennell Torrance from uttering some damning piece of evidence about him, or about someone he wished to protect."

Moving to the window, Janet Seaton said over her shoulder, "And did he? Afterward, I mean? I presume the police pressed him about it."

"No. He didn't give anyone away. He said he'd nothing more to say, except that he'd heard footsteps when he went outside at two o'clock. He supposed it was Finny returning."

Mrs. Seaton sighed and sat down in the armchair. "It's all very mystifying," she remarked in a vague, hostessy manner. "Surely the police must have formed some theory by now?"

Nigel offered no comment. Janet went on, with an irritable gesture.

"It's most unfortunate. Mara's being concerned in this. She's an unbalanced girl, I'm afraid, and I do not consider her at all a good influence on Lionel. To be quite frank with you, Mr. Strangeways, I should not be surprised if she'd concocted the whole thing—led him on to this escapade, I mean."

"I know all about Mara."

"You—?"

"About her and Oswald Seaton."

The unbecoming flush stained Janet's cheeks. "Do you mean to say she *told* you?" she exclaimed in a tone of outrage.

"Yes. I led her on a bit, of course. I'd guessed it some time ago."

"You can understand, then, why I don't care for Lionel to be too closely associated with her."

"Difficult to avoid, when you have the Torrances living here," said Nigel suavely.

"That was my husband's doing. I never approved of it."

"A young woman is not necessarily—er—undesirable, because she was the victim of a criminal assault ten years ago."

"It depends in what sense you use the word 'undesirable.' " Janet Seaton's mouth snapped shut like a miser's purse, but there was a glint of grim humor in her eyes.

"I can quite understand," said Nigel after a pause, "that you found it undesirable to have Oswald about the place after what had happened."

Janet Seaton, who never lounged in chairs, seemed to sit more bolt upright than ever. Her large-knuckled hands gripped the arms. But if Nigel had sought to flurry her, it was a failure.

"Are you suggesting that I engineered his disappearance?" she asked with dignity and composure.

"Somebody did. He couldn't have managed it by himself. You realize, of course, that the police are investigating that aspect of the case now?"

"What the police may be doing is no business of mine. But do you seriously think I would connive at the escape of a man who had—had behaved so abominably to a young girl in my charge? Really! The imputation is quite disgraceful!"

"Well, you and Robert hushed it up between you, surely. Why wasn't Oswald Seaton given in charge straight away?"

"It was not convenient." Janet might have been talking about a social engagement. She frowned at the quirk of amusement on Nigel's face. "It's not an unheard-of thing for family scandals to be hushed up, is it, Mr. Strangeways? And there's a considerable difference between hushing this one up and engineering Oswald's disappearance."

"Oh yes, I grant you that. If it was just a matter of locking the cupboard door on a skeleton—but you must see that the police are interested in the benefits you and your husband derived from Oswald's presumed death."

"I wish you would talk straight and not in these underhand hints." she exclaimed with a flare of anger. "You mean Robert and I got Oswald to disappear so that Robert could succeed to his property? We are accused of blackmail now, are we? The next thing, I suppose we'll be accused of—of doing away with Oswald here at Plash Meadow. Really, it's intolerable!"

Nigel gazed at her admiringly. "Talking of that," he said, "was Robert wearing his mackintosh when you and he went out to look after Kitty?"

For the first time, Janet seemed disconcerted.

"His mackintosh? Why? What an extraordinary question! I don't see the connection."

"I wondered. It had just begun to rain, hadn't it? And you were wearing a mackintosh. Did you borrow his, perhaps?"

"No, of course not. Why should I?" replied Janet rather sharply.

"I only mentioned it because Mara believed he hadn't got a mackintosh on when she saw you two cross the courtyard. Can you remember if Robert was wearing his when he came back from his walk?"

Janet Seaton made an odd little ducking movement with her head. Her voice was a bit flustered.

"How stupid of me! I'd quite forgotten. Yes, he was. He came in. He said he thought he'd heard Kitty kicking in the loose box. So we went out immediately; the rain was just beginning, but it wasn't bad yet. So I slipped on Robert's mac—it didn't seem worth while fetching my own. Yes, I remember now."

So that was that. Nigel eyed the handsome, harassed woman sitting bolt upright before him, her hands clasped in her lap, the prominent eyes downcast now. So she might have sat, he thought, if she had decided at last to visit the specialist and reveal the disquieting symptoms which for long she had been stoically enduring or desperately trying to ignore.

"Rennell said that, when Oswald left him, he saw him walk over here. It was about 12:20. You were sitting up. You didn't hear anything, I suppose? It seems odd that Oswald should come to this house—get this far—and then go away again without trying to see anyone."

"He would not want to see *me,*" said Janet darkly, staring down at her hands which lay like two rocks in her lap. "That's why—" she broke off.

"Yes?"

"I think I can explain it. I didn't tell the police because it went out of my head; and afterward, when I remembered, it seemed too trivial: besides, I assumed at the time it must have been my imagination."

"Yes?"

"Well, it was about ten minutes before my husband returned from his walk, I thought I heard the door open—the courtyard door. I was sitting in my boudoir. I went to the boudoir door and called quietly, 'Is that you, Robert?' I was expecting him back, you see, any moment. But there was no reply. So I naturally thought I'd been mistaken. How horrible! Do you suppose that man actually tried to get into the house?"

"It's an explanation. He recognized your voice, didn't want you to know he was here, and slid off again."

"But I can't understand it. Whom did he want to see? What did he come here for at all?"

"We've not much choice, have we?" said Nigel gently. "He'd hardly have come to meet Lionel, or Vanessa."

Janet's prominent eyes opened affrightedly. Then she closed them and at last lay back in the chair, her fists clenched on the arms of it—the pose of a flogged boxer in his corner at the end of a punishing round. She said faintly,

"Not Robert. I won't believe it. I *won't* believe it. Robert wouldn't be so insane as to invite that man to the house. There must be some other explanation."

And after all that, a day passed, another, two more, with a deepening sense of anticlimax for Nigel. The case seemed to hang fire. There was no news from Blount. Inexplicably Lionel and Mara were not found: they had disappeared as thoroughly as if spontaneous combustion had seized them. Sergeant Bower kept Nigel in touch with events. The car was discovered, the morning after their flight, in Foxhole Wood: it had been driven off the road, down one of the drives deep into the wood, then tastefully camouflaged with fern and branches, and abandoned. The police theory was that the fugitives had lain up in the wood till darkness came, and then set off on foot. A watch had been set on the roads and railway stations in the area and the station staffs warned, within half an hour of their leaving Plash Meadow. Understaffed though he was, Inspector Gates had at once set on foot inquiries at the houses of all their friends in the neighborhood. Nor, this time, was the church vault forgotten. But no report came in from any station along the main or branch lines; no cars had been hired or stolen; not a trace of the fugitives could be found for four days. Inspector Gates could only suppose they had thumbed a lift on a lorry that first night. Investigation at Plash Meadow showed they had taken with them two haversacks, some toilet necessaries and food for about three days.

On the fourth day, Blount telephoned to Gates from Bristol, suggesting he should call off the search locally. Lionel and Mara were posted in the list of "wanted persons" in the *Police Gazette.* Apart from this, which meant that the eye of every policeman in England would be lifting for them, no more time was to be wasted on the couple.

On the fifth day, a young man with an incipient beard and a tramplike appearance, but otherwise answering to the description of Lionel Seaton, was spotted in the market town of the next county. He leaped on a bicycle standing by the pavement, evaded the constable who had challenged him, and got away again in spite of the hue and cry that was raised. As Bower said, "Those young chaps trained for the Airborne and the Commandos, they're a proper bastard to lay your hands on." It seemed pretty clear that the pair had separated; in Nigel's opinion, Lionel was putting on an Elusive Pimpernel act intended to have nuisance value only. However this might be, Nigel now believed that the young man's escapade—if it were only an escapade—had been aimed at impressing his father no less than Mara. Robert Seaton was a being, no doubt, of sweetness and light. But a towering, deep-rooted genius must overshadow all lesser growths around it, and impoverish the soil for them: the children of a man so consecrated, so self-sufficient could not be altogether normal; the stronger the parent stock, the more violent and eccentric would be their efforts at times to assert their own personality. When the father was loved, as Robert was, these efforts would tend toward impressing him, not rebelling from him. What Lionel Seaton had in effect been saying, when he "confessed" to the hiding of Finny Black, when he did his Wild West turn in the old barn, was, "Look, father, I'm a man too, *I* can do something for *you.*" And his reward, could he have heard it, was in the tone of Robert's voice, disconcerted, fond and admiring, when he had said, "Oh dear me, he shouldn't have done that."

On the sixth day, Blount returned to Ferry Lacey. The superintendent looked grave, but triumphant.

"We found it at last," he said to Nigel. "Where Oswald Seaton lay up when he got to England. And we found a letter, inviting him to come down here. Aye, I reckon the case is over."

"A letter? From whom?"

"From Robert Seaton."

Chapter 13

Robert Seaton Explains

Nigel Strangeways examined the sheet of writing paper which Blount had laid before him.

"There is no question of a forgery," said Blount. "Our handwriting experts have been onto it."

"Oh no, it's his writing. I should know it by now."

"And you see it's cheap thin paper, torn off a block; not the stuff they generally use here, headed with the address. He was trying to safeguard himself—just in case."

The letter certainly had neither address nor date on it.

> DEAR OSWALD, *This is an incredible surprise to me. Of course I shall make no difficulties. But why didn't you write long ago to let me know you were alive? By all means let us meet. There is a train from Bristol that gets to Chillingham Junction at 10.58* P.M. *Travel by this on Thursday. I'll leave the courtyard door unlocked and be waiting for you in the drawing room—don't enter the house unless or until you see the drawing-room lights are out—I'll try to get J. to go to bed early, though. You realize she would not welcome your presence, and might make things very awkward for you. I shall not mention your return to her, therefore, till you and I have had a good talk. You must have your rights, I agree: but the matter is very ticklish because of that affair ten years ago. I would try and talk J. over; also Rennell and M. But in the meantime we must go very cautiously. So it is essential that you should destroy this letter and not advertise your arrival here. I rely on you to follow these instructions.*
>
> *Your affectionate brother,*
> ROBERT

"Will you walk into my parlor?" said Blount, as Nigel finished reading the letter.

"It looks bad, certainly. I don't wonder Oswald took all the precautions he did."

"He didn't take enough, though," Blount grimly replied. "Except to keep Robert Seaton's letter. And that didn't save him."

"How did you find it?"

According to the superintendent's account, Oswald Seaton had arrived at Bristol the Saturday before he came to Ferry Lacey. He had worked his passage on a tramp steamer from North Africa under the name of Roger Redcote: he must have been living under this name for some time, since his papers were all in order. On arrival at Bristol, he had taken a room in a house of very dubious reputation: its landlady was already on bad terms with the local police, and this was why they had had no success at first in their efforts to trace him. Finally, however, through the belated evidence of a young person who was one of this landlady's clients, the presence of "Roger Redcote" in the house, for several days before the murder of Oswald Seaton, was revealed. Blount interviewed the landlady: she was soon induced to part with a suitcase, belonging to Roger Redcote, which she had been keeping in lieu of her unpaid bill; she also told Blount that her lodger had received a letter (Oswald had evidently told Robert to write to him under his alias) on the Wednesday, and had disappeared the following evening.

On forcing open the suitcase, Blount had found the letter from Robert Seaton in the pocket of a coat.

"And what else did you find in the suitcase?" asked Nigel.

"Besides the jacket, there was a pair of trousers, two pairs of socks, a shirt, some cheap underwear, a copy of *No Orchids for Miss Blandish,* a pair of slippers, pajamas, a rough towel, a tie—all pretty shabby." Blount reeled off the list as if he had learned it by heart.

"Was that all?"

"That was all."

"Ah."

"Exactly," said Blount, with a keen look at Nigel.

"Yet Oswald was clean shaven at this time?"

"Just so."

"He expected to be fitted out when he got to Plash Meadow. He wouldn't bother to bring his worn-out old clothes. But he didn't leave his shaving things behind at Bristol, or his toothbrush—supposing the horrible creature used one."

"This girl who blew the gaff—she told us he used a cut-throat razor."

"Well, there's your weapon," said Nigel. "No doubt he was carrying it in his pocket."

"You're taking it all very calmly, I must say."

"Do you want me to give a war whoop? I'm very fond of Robert

Seaton. No doubt he said to Oswald, as the thunder rolled and the lightning played, 'Could you lend me a razor just a moment, old chap? I left mine in the house by mistake.' "

The superintendent looked hurt. "Oh come now, Strangeways, you're not being very co-operative."

"I only want you to tell me how the murderer managed to get hold of Oswald's razor—that's all: remembering that Oswald didn't trust a soul here."

"Presumably Oswald took off his mac at some point and Robert found the razor in the pocket."

"That seems to me very lame. And it suggests that the murder was unpremeditated—that Robert didn't think of it till he happened upon the razor. But this letter doesn't incriminate Robert unless it was part of a *plan* to get Oswald here and kill him. You can't have it both ways."

"Well, if you can give me any other reason why Robert, who had everything to lose by his brother's resurrection, encouraged him in it—damn it, Strangeways, he could just have ignored Oswald's letter! Oswald wouldn't have dared to appear here, with that criminal charge hanging over his head. Yet Robert writes back to him, 'Of course I shall make no difficulties.' How d'you explain that?"

"You'd better ask him. But, if my theory is correct that it was Janet who blackmailed Oswald out of the country ten years ago, and that Robert had had no suspicions about her share in the proceedings, until Oswald reappeared, then his recent behavior makes sense."

"You mean, he just wanted to make honorable restitution?"

"Partly that," said Nigel. "And partly to protect his wife. He'd soon realize that Oswald could make things as hot for Janet, because of her complicity in his 'suicide,' as she could for Oswald. I suggest Robert's idea was to get everyone round a table and discuss how a compromise could be reached. At any rate, he'd want to make sure that Oswald didn't intend to blow the gaff on Janet; and, in return for Oswald's silence about this, he'd promise that no action would be taken over the Mara affair—and possibly throw in some hush money as well. Didn't you and Slingsby find out anything in Somerset?"

"We did. And it supports your theory. But it's vairy inconclusive."

Blount summarized the results of this part of the investigation. Inspector Slingsby, following a ten-year-old trail—and one which had petered out to nothing when the police originally followed it, after Oswald's disappearance—had interviewed scores of people in the Somerset village where Oswald's seaside cottage was situated. Having talked to everyone who had been living there at the time of the disappearance, and discovered nothing inconsistent with the findings of the original investigation, Slingsby then set out pertinaciously to trace various individuals who had left the village since. His diligence was finally rewarded when he hit the trail of a certain Eliza Hanham. This woman had moved to a village near Bridgwater after the death of her brother in 1942; this brother, a R.N.R. man, recalled to the navy at the beginning of the war, had been killed during a dive-bombing attack upon a convoy in the Mediterranean. Eliza Hanham herself had died a few weeks ago: but in her cottage there had been discovered a hoard of money—nearly £150 in notes of small denominations. Both she and her brother were notoriously close; and the brother had owned a small motor fishing boat, which Oswald and his guests used sometimes to hire. Further investigation disclosed that Eliza Hanham had bought her cottage with the money accruing from the sale of her brother's boat, and that she had no source of income apart from the pension which came to her after his death. It proved impossible to account for the notes found in her cottage, except on the theory that they had been given to her brother in return for services to Oswald, ten years ago, and kept hoarded ever since. At the time, the police had interviewed this John Hanham; but he and his sister both said he had slept at home on the night of Oswald's disappearance: asked to account for Janet Lacey's visiting his cottage two days before it—a visit reported to the police by some neighbors—John Hanham explained that she had come to discuss a fishing trip for Oswald's house party. The police had naturally kept an eye open, for some time after Oswald's disappearance, in case any of the local boatmen started flinging money about in a suspicious way. But John Hanham had been much too fly to do that.

So far, the evidence was pretty negative. Brother and sister being dead—and a couple who in life had kept themselves to themselves—the source of Eliza's hoard could be confirmed neither by questioning nor through gossip. However, Slingsby had then started at the other end and sought for corroborative evidence in the bank accounts of Oswald Seaton, Robert and Janet Lacey. Here at first he was met with a blank wall. The original investigation had covered this ground and Slingsby found nothing to contradict its conclusions—that none of the three had withdrawn a large sum just before Oswald's disappearance, and none of them had a private account elsewhere from which the money could have been withdrawn. Superintendent Blount, turning up at this point, had suggested that Slingsby should inquire next into the affairs of old Mrs. Lacey—Janet's mother. This was the only point which, as far as he could tell from the police records, had not been satisfactorily covered. Slingsby set to work again, tracked down the man who at the time had been manager of the Redcote bank where old Mrs. Lacey kept her account, and after consultation with him and the present manager, had come upon a very significant fact. It appeared that, two days before Oswald's disappearance, the Redcote branch received a telephone call from Mrs. Lacey in Somerset. The old lady appeared to be panic stricken about the imminence of war, and asked for all the money in her current account, £300-odd, to be sent her in notes. The manager tried to persuade her that, even if war did come the next week, her money would be much safer in the bank than in a stocking under her bed; but she was an obstinate old lady; so after the bank had received a letter of confirmation from her, the money was sent.

Once again, the evidence could only be called circumstantial. Old Mrs. Lacey was dead. There was no proof that her £300 had played a part in the conspiracy which got Oswald Seaton out of the country. But Oswald *had* been conveyed away, John Hanham *had* been approached by Janet Lacey just before, and his sister *had* come into possession of an otherwise unaccountable £150. So it seemed reasonable to suppose that someone, perhaps Oswald himself, more likely Janet, had preyed upon Mrs. Lacey's fear of war, induced her to take out her money, then "borrowed" or stolen it, to pay John Hanham and to provide Oswald with some ready cash. Blount conjectured that the old lady had been kept quiet, once Oswald's "suicide" took place, by the assurance that she would benefit from Oswald's estate when Robert, now engaged to marry her daughter, came in for it.

"Well," said Blount at the end of it, "we've got to have a showdown now."

"With Mrs. Seaton?"

"With her husband. The matter of the conspiracy can wait. I'm going to clear up the murder first."

"D'you mind if I sit in?"

"Please yourself. But no funny business. If Seaton wants help, he'll have to get his solicitor along."

"One thing, Blount, I wish you'd ask him or Janet." Nigel explained the point about the mackintosh. "It seems odd that a woman who fusses over her husband's health, as Janet does, should have allowed him to go out with her, just when a thundershower was starting, without his mackintosh."

"She says she borrowed his, eh? Well, I'll mention it: but it doesn't seem to me of any significance."

Five minutes later they were in Robert Seaton's study. Sergeant Bower, sitting at the poet's desk, to one side of which was pushed the little black notebook that held Robert's immortality (the poem had been finished two days ago), licked his pencil. Nigel was perched on the window seat. The superintendent, beside the desk, faced Robert and Janet Seaton: he was, Nigel knew, at his most formidable; yet, such were the presence of Janet and the innate dignity of her husband, that even Blount's burly form seemed to shrink. He might have been just the local bobby come to enlist their help for a police fete or to examine a gun license.

"In view of certain new evidence, Mr. Seaton, I am going to ask you to amplify your previous statements to the police. What you say will be taken down, and may be used in evidence. You are under no compulsion to answer my questions. And you are entitled to have a legal representative present, if you wish."

"I don't think there's any need for that," said Robert.

"Very well then. Will you tell me under what circumstances you wrote this letter to your brother, Oswald." Blount moved bulkily over to Robert and held the letter in front of his eyes for a few moments.

"So the silly fellow didn't destroy it after all?" the poet murmured. "All right, you needn't hold it in front of me. I've got a good memory."

"You admit you wrote this letter?"

"What *is* this, dear?" asked Janet.

"Yes, of course I did."

"But you concealed the fact from Inspector Gates and myself? Why?"

"Oh come, Superintendent! That's not a very intelligent question," replied Robert lightly. "Once it had been established that the dead man was Oswald, things would obviously look bad for me if I'd told you I'd written inviting him to come down here."

Janet Seaton gasped. "Robert! What could have possessed you to?—You *invited* him here?"

Her husband looked a bit sheepish—not guilty so much as apologetic and stubborn at the same time: it might have been some social arrangement he had made, knowing it would incur her displeasure, yet convinced he was right to make it. The hypnotic atmosphere of Plash Meadow once again began to creep over Nigel. Here was the crucial point of a murder investigation: and here were the two chief suspects behaving as though nothing was at stake but the disposition of an unwelcome guest.

"Why did you, Mr. Seaton?" asked Blount softly.

"Invite him? Oh well, he was my brother after all."

"I don't quite mean that. This letter makes it clear that you realized his presence here would be unwelcome to Mrs. Seaton. So why didn't you go to Bristol to see him? Wouldn't that have been a more natural thing to do, under the circumstances?"

"Natural?" Robert Seaton seemed to hold up the word in the air before him, examining it from every angle, as if it had been a possible epithet for a line of verse. "Ah no. That would only have been to postpone things. I wanted to force the issue, you see."

"Will you explain that, please."

"Oswald would have to have the estate back. But my wife would resist this, I knew. Besides, there were Rennell and Mara to consider: they might have brought up the old affair against Oswald."

"You mean his criminal assault upon Miss Torrance?"

"Yes."

"And when you said in your letter, 'Of course I shall make no difficulties,' you meant no difficulties about his getting back the estate?"

"Yes."

"You were prepared to give up everything, to go back to poverty, to deprive your wife and children of all this—" Blount made a semicircular gesture with his hand "—without a murmur?"

"I daresay it wouldn't have been as bad as that. Oswald might have looked after us. But I had to do what I thought was right."

"Hmm. So, by 'forcing the issue,' you meant inviting Oswald down here and compelling your wife and friends to accept the situation?"

"More or less."

Blount leaned forward suddenly. "Then why all the secrecy? Why those elaborate plans to smuggle him into the house, by night, without your wife's knowledge? If you wanted to force the issue, wouldn't it have been more—e'eh—more effective to have announced that Oswald was alive, and that you intended to make restitution? To discuss the matter with the others *before* you invited him here? Surely you would first have sounded Mr. Torrance, for instance, as to whether he was prepared to drop the old charge against your brother?"

"One doesn't always do what is most effective." Robert Seaton's fine eyes levelly returned Blount's somewhat pugnacious stare. "I wanted to have a private talk with him first—discover the lay of the land—before making it public. What you call 'the secrecy' was just a precaution for Oswald's sake."

"Whom did you suppose he had to be protected from?"

"Why, I've just told you—"

"It was not in your mind to protect him from—well, from your wife, for instance."

"From Janet? But my dear fellow—"

"You did not know that your wife had arranged Oswald's fake suicide ten years ago—"

"Superintendent! How dare you suggest—" exclaimed Mrs. Seaton.

"—and that she was thus liable to a very grave charge of conspiracy? And that Oswald, the only living witness to this, was a menace to her therefore?"

Janet Seaton rose formidably to her feet. "Superintendent, I insist on an explanation of this extraordinary charge."

"I am afraid it is you who will have to do the explaining, ma'am. As for instance, the three hundred pounds withdrawn from your mother's account a couple of days before Oswald's disappearance, and the large sum of money handed over to John Hanham in return for his services."

Mrs. Seaton sat down as abruptly as she had risen, her face rigid, glaring at the wall before her. Robert was studying his clasped hands: his small body seemed to have dwindled. The superintendent turned to him again.

"Do you claim to have known nothing, suspected nothing, about your brother's 'suicide'? You were quite unaware, till now, that your wife had engineered it so as to get his estate into your hands and hers? And that the lever she used was the Mara Torrance affair—blackmail, in fact?"

"I cannot answer that question." The poet looked small and sick.

"He does not need to answer it," put in Nigel. "The first sentence of his letter to Oswald is the answer. 'This is an incredible surprise to me.' If Mr. Seaton had known the truth about his brother's disappearance, it would be gratuitous and pointless for him to pretend surprise when Oswald reappeared. What Mr. Seaton may have suspected later is quite another matter."

Blount shrugged his heavy shoulders. "Let us go back to your letter, then. It was in reply to one from your brother. Have you kept his letter?"

"No. I destroyed it."

"Just so. Can you remember exactly what he said?"

"Not word for word. He said he was at Bristol; gave me a name and address to write to; asked me what I was going to do about it."

"Did he—e'eh—make any threats?"

"No. Unless you call that last remark a threat."

"He said nothing about his 'suicide'?"

"No."

"He assumed you knew the truth about it, then?"

"I've no idea what he assumed. It was a brief letter, anyway—only a few lines."

Blount hunched himself in his chair. "Now this is important, Mr.

Seaton. Could anyone else here have known you had invited your brother down? Did you leave your reply to him lying about before you posted it, for instance?"

"No. I wrote back to him the same day I received his letter. In any case, no one but Finny—and, of course, Janet—comes into my study." Robert chuckled. "It's a *sanctum,* in the strictest sense of the word."

"Did you post the letter yourself?"

"Yes."

"May I ask one question?" said Nigel. "Did you use your Biro to write it?"

"Why, yes, no doubt I did."

"But you didn't use your ordinary headed notepaper."

"No." Robert gave Nigel a look as much as to say, '*You* at any rate will understand this.' "I—it would have been in rather bad taste somehow. Rubbing in the fact that I was the occupier of his own property."

"I fancy such refinements of—e'eh—sensibility would be wasted upon Oswald Seaton," said Blount dryly. "However. Having carefully arranged for him to arrive secretly, at night, when your household had gone to bed, you then decided not to wait for him here after all. You went for a walk instead. What explanation can you give for this change of plan?"

"I changed my mind at the last minute; thought I would go a little way to meet him. It never occurred to me that he'd take the short cut."

"I see. And when you did eventually meet him—after you'd got back here again—"

"Oh, but I didn't. You mustn't lay these traps for me, Superintendent," remarked Robert Seaton mildly.

"You would be prepared to swear, on your oath, in a court of law, that you never saw your brother that night?" asked Blount with impressive solemnity.

Nigel noticed that Janet Seaton's eyes were tight shut, her head pressed back against her chair, as if at the peak of an ordeal.

Robert Seaton gazed levelly at Blount, an expression of boyish, almost cherubic innocence on his face. "I am willing to swear, on my oath, that I never saw Oswald alive after that day, ten years ago, when he disappeared."

"But you saw him dead, eh?" asked Blount sharply.

"I had to—er—view the body, as you know. And I was present when the head was found."

Blount allowed a silence to protract itself, like an evening shadow, over the room. Janet lay back in her chair, inert as a corpse. Briskly rubbing his hands, the poet glanced up toward Blount, then to Sergeant Bower whose pencil was poised at attention.

"Very well," said Blount at last, a little wearily. "You returned from your walk. You were still expecting your brother to arrive. Yet you went out twice into the courtyard with Mrs. Seaton, within the next half hour, although Oswald might turn up at any moment. How do you square this with your intention to keep his arrival a secret?"

"It was very awkward, I agree. But Janet was restless that night—wouldn't go to bed—the storm, you know. So I had to risk Oswald running into us the first time. But I calculated he would avoid Janet if he saw her: that's why I took out the storm lantern—a sort of danger signal. And the second time, when we went to look for Finny—well, I imagined something must have prevented Oswald coming, it was so late by then."

Nigel had to admire the stoical way in which Blount took this blow to his case: yet another article of suspicion, the storm lantern, had been naturally, credibly disposed of. It began to dawn upon Nigel that, as things were going, there simply were not adequate grounds for arresting Robert Seaton, and that Blount realized this too.

"When you went out of the house the first time, with Mrs. Seaton, it was raining and she borrowed your mackintosh?" asked the superintendent.

"Yes."

"Tell me now, Mrs. Seaton—you allowed your husband to go out into a heavy thundershower—"

"It was only just across the courtyard, and my own mackintosh was upstairs."

"Your *only* mackintosh, did you say?" put in Nigel.

"I didn't. But, as you ask, I have only the one."

"The long one I saw you wearing the day Lionel and Mara went off?"

"Presumably."

Robert Seaton was at last looking really worried. "What is the point, Nigel? You're not suggesting that this was the mackintosh found upon the body, are you? I only possess one myself, and that's hanging up in the hall."

"No, I had something else in my mind. Did you have your mac with you when you were out for your walk?"

"I—yes, I think I did." Robert answered with something less than his usual crispness. A frenzied ringing of a bicycle bell came to their ears from the courtyard below.

"You see," Nigel went on slowly, his eyes fixed upon Robert's, "it would explain everything—how that chap down the lane saw you at quarter to one, how Oswald was killed, and why, and *by whom*—oh, everything, if—"

Feet were galloping up the stairs. A voice cried, "Daddy! Daddy!"

"If what?" asked Robert Seaton, more intent than Nigel had ever yet seen him.

"If it wasn't your mackintosh that—"

Before Nigel could finish the sentence, the door was flung open as if by a mighty, rushing wind, and Vanessa, pink cheeked, hair flying, breathlessly announced,

"Daddy . . . I've found . . . Mara!"

Chapter 14

Farewell to the Roses

A few minutes later, Blount had swirled off in his car to Hinton Lacey. Vanessa's story was that she had bicycled over there earlier in the morning, to fetch a couple of chickens which had been ordered from Paul Willingham. Waiting for them to be dressed, she had been left alone in the parlor. She was sitting in a big armchair there and counting her money, when she found a sixpence was missing. She thought it might have fallen into the chink between the seat and the side of the chair. She pushed her fingers in, and pulled out, not the sixpence, but a woman's handkerchief, which she recognized at once as Mara's. Paul Willingham, coming in that moment, took it from her rather unceremoniously, saying that Mara must have left it behind during her last visit. Vanessa asked when this had been, and Paul said a fortnight ago. But Vanessa knew this handkerchief had only been bought a couple of days before Mara's disappearance, for Mara had shown it to her then.

Vanessa, at once bitten by intense curiosity and the detective urge, kept her head. She took the chickens, paid for them, put them in her bicycle basket, and pedaled away. But she went no further than the village inn, where she left her bicycle; then, summoning up all her resources as a tracker, returned to the farm and cautiously reconnoitered. She had instantly jumped to the conclusion that Paul Willingham must have made away with Mara, and concealed the body somewhere on the premises. But while peering round, from the cover of an outbuilding, for signs of freshly dug earth, she noticed that the curtains of a spare bedroom in the farmhouse were drawn. This struck her as curious, since Paul normally kept all the curtains open during the daytime: so she settled down to keep the window under observation; and after half an hour she was rewarded by the sight of the curtains being cautiously parted and the face of Mara Torrance appearing for a moment at the window.

"So I deduced that Paul had been hiding Mara and hadn't murdered her after all," Vanessa concluded, a faint note of disappointment in her voice. "Or perhaps he's keeping her a prisoner, for felonious reasons of his own."

"Well done, lassie," said Blount. "I must ask you all to stay in the house till I return."

Robert Seaton passed his hand wearily over his face, when Blount had left the room. "There's got to be an end to this," Nigel heard him mutter.

Janet rose. "Where are the chickens, Vanessa?"

"In my bicycle basket still. Shall I give them to Cook?"

"Yes. And please understand, Vanessa, there's nothing to be proud of in spying upon people."

Vanessa gazed at her stepmother, her face drained white with shock. Then tears filled her eyes, and she rushed from the room, slamming the door.

"Janet, you shouldn't have said that. It was unpardonable." Robert's voice was quite impersonal. He looked straight at his wife—a look without love, without even the anger which comes of love abused: Janet might have been a stranger to him, thought Nigel, as he went to his own room. . . .

When he heard Blount's car return, Nigel walked across to the old barn. He found Mara, with her father and Blount in the studio.

"You're a fool, Mara," Rennell was saying as he entered. "It's only a matter of time, the superintendent has told you, before Lionel is picked up. So why not tell us where he is."

"Because I *don't know,*" said the girl in an exasperated voice. "Oh, hello Nigel. I wish you'd stop these people badgering me. I don't seem able to make the superintendent understand that I don't care two hoots whether I'm put in prison for obstructing the police in the performance of their duties, or whatever the rigmarole is."

"You may not care," exclaimed her father, "but—"

"—But there'd be nobody to cook your meals. It'd be just too bad, wouldn't it?"

"You make me sick! Don't you ever think of anyone else but yourself, and that young thug you've got yourself tangled up with?"

Mara, smiling secretly to herself, ignored it.

"Robert has finished the poem, my dear," said Nigel.

The girl's face became vivid, almost transfigured. "You've seen it?" she asked eagerly. "But I know it's wonderful. It was sure to be." She sighed, relaxing in her chair. "It *was* worth it. Oh, I feel so happy! I don't mind what happens now. I've paid my debt, haven't I, Nigel?"

"Ah yes," said her father, his pudgy face twisted almost out of shape with malice. "As long as Robert can write his piddling verse, nothing else matters. Not even a murder. Well, let me tell you, my girl, he'll not do any more."

"Any more poetry? Why shouldn't—?"

"Any more murder. And therefore any more poetry."

"Father! You're insane! What do you mean?" Mara was standing over him, her fists clenched. Rennell, as if intimidated by the words which naked jealousy had forced out of him, averted his eyes from her and would not answer.

"Come now, Mr. Torrance," said Blount. "It is your duty to tell the police anything you—"

"He doesn't know anything," cried Mara. "Don't believe a word he—"

"Hold your tongue, young woman!" The superintendent lost his self-control for a moment. "Take her out of here, Strangeways; she's made quite enough nuisance of herself."

Mara allowed Nigel to lead her upstairs to her own room, where she flung herself on to the bed, sobbing.

"It's not true! It's not true! He's always hated Robert. Oh God, I—"

"Listen to me, Mara," said Nigel firmly. "Pull yourself together! There's one question you must answer. About what you saw that night."

Nigel asked the question.

Mara's stricken eyes opened wide; her body seemed to be held in a vice. "Yes," she whispered at last. "Yes, it could have been. But—"

"That's all I want to know. No, don't ask questions. Tell me about your own adventures. It was a hairbrained thing to do, wasn't it?"

"I'd do anything for Robert."

Mara's tale was soon told. On returning in the motor canoe to Ferry Lacey, after her conversation with Nigel, she had thought it only fair to let Rennell know about it. A little later she heard her father telephone to Superintendent Blount, saying he wished to make a statement. She had at once sought out Lionel, and they decided they must somehow listen in to this statement: now that Rennell knew the police would be informed of the Mara-Oswald affair, and of Oswald's arrival at the old barn that night, Mara feared that he might try to incriminate someone else. The plan for over-hearing what he said to Blount was then elaborated into a scheme for drawing suspicion upon Lionel. Neither of them, Mara now perhaps too urgently insisted, had ever believed that Robert was the culprit. But they did realize he must be under grave suspicion: and it was Lionel's idea that, if he himself could create a temporary diversion, the police would stop pestering his father, who would then have time to finish his poem without distractions.

It was a naïve idea, and a childish plan, as Mara now admitted. However, he had egged her on to play a part in it; not that she required much persuasion—their new-found love made everything they did together seem like a wild, innocent game. Mara would have preferred to follow it out with Lionel to the end, sleeping with him in ditches or haystacks, sharing the risks and the gypsy delights of two lovers on the run. But Lionel had been determined that they should separate; it would give him much greater freedom of action, and therefore gain all the more time for Robert. So it was arranged that, if they did make their getaway, they should lie up for one night in Foxhole Wood, and Mara should make her way on foot to Hinton Lacey, before daylight, and ask Paul Willingham to hide her. If he refused to do so, or her presence at the farm was soon discovered, Lionel would still be at large and no great harm done.

Lionel had been in a state of irresponsible excitement, careless of the consequences both to Mara and himself, and to Paul. But Mara was more level headed. When she got to the farm, she spun a tale for Paul Willingham's benefit, saying that her father had threatened her with violence when she told him she was going to marry Lionel, and would have kept her locked up in the old barn: she had escaped, and implored Paul to hide her until Lionel returned with a special license. Whether or no Paul really believed this romantic tale, it would at least provide him some sort of defense if the police discovered Mara's presence at the farm. He had, in fact, been out when Inspector Gates called there to inquire about Mara: and the housekeeper, who did not sleep in and had no idea even now—the spare room being kept locked during the day—that Mara was there, had told Gates in all good faith that she had not seen the girl.

After hearing Mara's story, Nigel went downstairs. Blount was about to depart and asked Nigel to drive back to Hinton Lacey with him. Sergeant Bower was left to keep an eye on the inmates of Plash Meadow. The superintendent was very taciturn on the drive. He stopped at the public call box, and spoke for some minutes. At last they were alone in Blount's room at the Lacey Arms.

"Well?" asked Nigel.

"I've asked Gates to relieve Bower as soon as possible. And he's going to tell the newspapers that the police expect to make an arrest very shortly."

"You can't arrest Robert Seaton on your present evidence. It simply isn't good enough."

Blount gave his friend a meditative look. "He'd by far the strongest motive for it, you can't deny that."

"Robert had a very strong motive for murdering Oswald," said Nigel slowly, "but he had an even stronger one for not murdering him."

"Och, I'm too old to be impressed by these paradoxes of yours," said Blount after a pause, since Nigel did not seem disposed to enlarge upon the statement. "No. But I fancy young Seaton will make a move when he sees in tomorrow's papers that an arrest is imminent."

"He'll come tearing back here. That's what he'll do."

"Aye. Mph'm. Just so."

Something in Blount's tone made Nigel look at him sharply. "When you start talking your hideous native lingo, I always know you've got something up your sleeve. Out with it!"

"E'eh, well perhaps we lay our hands on young Lionel. That's something, isn't it? Gates is going to draw a mighty fine mesh round Plash Meadow."

"And you arrest Lionel for carrying arms, for intimidating a witness, for obstructing the police, and what have you. But all that won't find you the murderer of Oswald Seaton."

"Maybe no. Maybe it will. It depends whether Lionel does come back. If he does, it will be to rally round his father. If he doesn't—" Blount vigorously massaged his bald head "—if he doesn't, then he's our man."

"What on earth do you mean by that?"

"Rennell Torrance has come clean at last. He has just told me that he saw Lionel Seaton, round about two o'clock that night, skulking along beside the dairy."

"Crikey!" Nigel was thoroughly startled. "D'you believe him?"

"I don't know why he should make it up. Or why, if he was making it up, he should wait till now to let it out."

Blount proceeded to outline the case against Lionel Seaton. First, he had claimed to have slept through the thunderstorms of the fatal night: yet he had been awakened by Nigel's shout for help on a subsequent night; and Torrance had seen him "skulking along beside the dairy" at the time of Oswald's murder. Lionel had therefore lied. Had he lied to protect himself, or someone else? Up to this point, there had been a too facile assumption (thought Blount) that all Lionel's actions could be explained as part of a design to protect his father. But suppose the exact opposite were true? Suppose that Robert had seen Lionel—as well he might, having been twice across the courtyard that night—behaving in a suspicious manner? had caught him, perhaps, actually disposing of the corpse? Could not all of Robert's subsequent behavior, the hiding and supplying of Finny Black, for instance, be explained by an intention to conceal his son's guilt?

Nigel agreed that it could.

Second, the simplest solution of Lionel's "escapade" in the old barn was that he had been genuinely afraid lest Rennell Torrance might disclose some incriminating evidence against him. He had therefore threatened Rennell with his pistol: and not unsuccessfully, for Rennell had, in fact, kept silence till this morning. It was a desperate thing to do, certainly. But Lionel may have been a desperate man by then; and he might also have been clever enough to perceive that such a public exhibition of violence would draw suspicion away from him, as indeed it did—would look like the action of a quixotic young man trying to protect somebody else. His later actions—the deliberate brush with the policeman in the market town, for example—would lend color to this picture.

Third, and this was perhaps the strongest point in Blount's theory, Lionel was the most likely of all the suspects from the physical point of view. He was young; he had been trained in the ruthless combat technique of the Airborne troops; only a strong, cunning and ruthless man could have done everything which was done to Oswald Seaton that night. It was difficult to imagine the pudgy Torrance, or the slight-built Robert, let alone Janet, cutting the throat of a man who would certainly be on his guard, then severing the head, then carrying the body to the river and towing it downstream.

Fourth, the motive. This hinged on the question whether Lionel knew what Oswald had done to Mara ten years before. Mara herself, and Robert, had said that Lionel was ignorant of this: but they might well have done so to protect Lionel. If Lionel did know about it, on the other hand, he had a most compelling motive—his love for Mara and his experience of the hideous psychological damage which Oswald had inflicted upon her, to say nothing of the further harm that might be done if Oswald appeared in her life again.

Fifth, opportunity. This was the weakest point of Blount's case, as he freely admitted. To suppose that Lionel had run into Oswald that night, before the latter could make contact with Robert, was to postulate a thumping coincidence.

"Not necessarily," Nigel said.

"But he couldn't possibly, if Robert's evidence just now is to be believed, have known that Oswald was coming to Plash Meadow—couldn't know he was alive, even."

"You're forgetting Robert's Biro. And the thin blockpaper he used for writing to his brother. Paul Willingham told me the other day that a Biro leaves a visible impression on the sheet below the one you're writing on. I tried the experiment later myself, and it's quite true. It's quite possible for Lionel to have gone into his father's study, soon after he'd written it, and seen a facsimile of the letter on the pad."

"So that's what you were after! Well, the murder may have been premeditated, then. At any rate, Lionel might have been on the wait for Oswald, to head him off. But now we come to the next snag. How could he get hold of Oswald's razor. And where is that damned razor? We've pretty well taken the house, the dairy, the outbuildings and the old barn to pieces, looking for it. And why should the murderer have been at such pains to conceal it? He'd only to wipe his fingerprints off, and being Oswald's razor, it wouldn't incriminate him more than anyone else."

"Don't ask me. I haven't the faintest idea. But, going back to premeditation or the reverse—" Nigel looked strangely at Blount "—no, we'll leave that for a moment. Let's go further back still. To Robert's poetry. I'm convinced that his poetry is at the very roots of this case. Now, you suggested that Robert's actions have been dictated by a wish to protect his son, whom he knows or gravely suspects is the murderer. Yet, since the murder, Robert was written a great poetic sequence. Poets can be pretty heartless, inhuman almost, when their work is in question. But I can't see Robert writing merrily away with the knowledge that his son, whom he loves, is a murderer."

"Well, maybe not. But—"

"No, wait a minute. I'm going to spring a mine under you, so hold tight. It's a variant of your own theory. Suppose that Janet, not Lionel, read the impression of Robert's letter: she'd be more likely to, because Robert told us that no one but Janet was normally allowed into his study. She now knows what date and approximate time Oswald will turn up at Plash Meadow. She intends, perhaps, only to gatecrash on the meeting between Oswald and Robert: Oswald won't get the estate back if she has any say in the matter. But, at zero hour, the wretched Robert is missing; out for a walk. Janet hears the courtyard door open. That was her own admission. But she doesn't, as she pretended to me, call out 'Robert': she suspects the visitor is Oswald, she goes down the passage—and Oswald it is! What is she to do? Her instinctive reaction, I suggest, would be to get him out of the house—*her* house. Under some pretext, she persuades him to walk across to the dairy with her."

Blount slapped his head. "Good Lord, man! You mean it was he—"

"Yes, the man Mara saw crossing the courtyard with Janet could have been Oswald. I asked her just now, and she agreed. She assumed at the time that it was Robert, quite naturally. But the man was on the far side of Janet, and Mara had only one lightning flash to glimpse him by; and anyway, Robert and Oswald are about the same build, and not unlike one another in feature. This would explain how the expectant father was able to see Robert, about a quarter of an hour later, walking down the lane toward Plash Meadow. Well then—"

"By the Lord, Strangeways, I believe you've got it!" exclaimed Blount. "She'd lock Oswald into the dairy, or tell him to wait there till Robert turned up. Then she'd get a scunner, maybe, at the idea of a deadly wee fellow like Oswald being about the place. She'd lose her nerve suddenly, and want protection. But Robert was away somewhere, walking. So her natural impulse would be to run along to Lionel's bedroom, and wake him, and tell him what had happened. Lionel gets up and goes across to the dairy alone. Maybe he knows about Oswald and Mara, maybe not. But Oswald draws his razor on the lad, and Lionel wrests it from him, and Oswald gets his throat cut. Aye, it all fits in. And this would explain why Robert was able to write his vairses. He didn't know what had happened at Plash Meadow while he was away. It was Janet who's been protecting Lionel. It was she who persuaded Robert to conceal Finny Black—aye, it'd explain all her actions too—and it's possible that Robert may have been thinking all this time it was Janet who'd killed Oswald—that would account for *his;* but it'd no' interfere with his poetry writing, because he does not care for Janet—not as he does for Lionel and Vanessa."

"Ah, you've noticed that too, have you?"

"It's written on his face; and on hers, forby."

"So now what?"

"We wait for Lionel to come back. If he doesn't, we'll go out after him."

"Lionel. Yes. What a home-coming!" said Nigel, with unusual emotion. "You'll not be able to charge him with the murder, of course."

"Not yet. Not on the evidence we've got, I agree. There should have been clothes of his with bloodstains on them. And there are other little snags. But I'll sort it, when we've got him. It's the most convincing theory of the crime, Strangeways."

"Oh, it's a beautiful theory," Nigel wearily replied. "On paper." . . .

Dinner at Plash Meadow that evening was a somber, uneasy affair. Even Finny Black seemed to feel the weighted atmosphere: he came in and out with the dishes, dragging his steps like a sick dog. Vanessa was obviously hard put to it to swallow her helping of chicken. After dinner, in the drawing room, she suddenly moved across to her father, who sat with his hand shading his eyes, and ran her fingers gently through his hair—a mature, maternal gesture.

"I'll sing to you," she said. "Poor old Saul. David will sing to him. I wish I could play the harp too."

She went to the piano, and accompanying herself in a wooden way that strangely consorted with the pure, small, unwavering tone of her voice, sang *The Queen's Maries,* and *Lord Randal, My Son.* Then she sang *Will Ye No' Come Back Again?* Janet Seaton's face was like stone. Tears trickled through Robert's fingers.

"That was beautiful, my dearest," he said when she had finished. "Thank you. It used to be your mo—it's one of my favorite songs."

"I know what you were going to say," she breathed into his ear as she kissed him good night.

Janet Seaton sat stiffly, like a stranger in the room, containing her agony. She offered her cheek to Vanessa: then, a few seconds after, blindly stretched out her hand; but the door was already closed behind the girl.

"How much longer is this going on?" asked Robert presently.

Nigel said, "I think Lionel will turn up again soon."

"Lionel? But—are the police waiting for that?" Janet's voice was low and harsh.

"Well, yes."

"I suppose they're bound to take a serious view of this escapade of his?" said Robert.

"Yes, I'm afraid so. It might be very serious. If there was a question of his being an accomplice after the fact. Or—"

"—Or what?" asked Janet sharply.

"I must tell you that he's under grave suspicion for the actual murder."

"Oh, but that's ridiculous!" Robert's face had the placatory, groping expression of a deaf man who sees others laughing at a joke he has not quite caught.

Janet Seaton's breath came in a shuddering sigh. She left the room abruptly, the keys jangling in her black chatelaine bag.

"I oughtn't to be staying here any longer," said Nigel. "It's not fair to you."

Robert Seaton gazed at him with a pure intensity which Nigel found difficult to meet: it was as if a last veil had dropped from the poet's eyes.

"Do you know who killed my brother?" he said.

"Yes, I think I know everything now."

"Well, don't go yet. Stay on just a little longer, and see us—see us all through it. Will you do that, my dear fellow?" . . .

* * *

Nigel did not, in fact, have to wait very long. The following day and night mounted in a crescendo of suspense such as he had never experienced before—and one which he could never afterward look back upon except with pain and dismay.

At breakfast the newspapers announced that an arrest was imminent in the Ferry Lacey case. Robert quietly passed his *News Chronicle* to Janet, his finger marking the paragraph. Then he glanced at Nigel, who at once left the table and put through a call to the inn at Hinton Lacey. The landlord sent one of his children to fetch Paul Willingham.

"Have they arrested you yet, Paul?" asked Nigel.

"As it so happens, not. I suppose there'll be trouble over young Mara. Your superintendent gave me a rocket yesterday about 'harboring her,' as he put it. But I stuck to my story—or rather, her story—"

"Never mind about that. You've got to harbor another female now. We're sending Vanessa to stay with you for a few nights."

"Oh, it's like that, is it? I'm sorry. Damn this bloody business! I'll invite my young cousin, Priscilla, to keep her company."

A very subdued Vanessa sat beside Nigel in the Seatons' car, half an hour later. She had shown signs of mutiny at first; but her father had gently persuaded her that she must go—the house would be full of policemen for a day or two, he said, and they wouldn't want her getting in among their large feet.

"Bye-bye, love," he said, as the car was about to depart. "See you soon. Be a good girl, and don't ride Paul's pony too hard." Robert's voice was cheerful and matter-of-fact. He kissed his daughter, waved once, walked steadily back into the house. Nigel felt, looking back on it afterward, that he had never seen a more heroic action.

"It's all wrong!" Vanessa burst out, as the car drove through the gateway. "It's all wrong! I know there's something wrong!" And that was all she said till they arrived at Paul Willingham's farm.

On his return, Nigel was met by Robert Seaton, who handed him a telegram.

"EXPECT ME BACK ABOUT ELEVEN TONIGHT. LIONEL," it said.

"It's just come," said Robert. "I suppose your superintendent has to be told about this?"

"I expect he knows already. They've been keeping a watch on all communications for Plash Meadow."

"Ah well. I hope Vanessa didn't take it too hard?"

"She'll be all right."

"Good. I'm sure she will. If you'll forgive me, I must go and do a bit of writing now." The poet walked briskly upstairs again. . . .

Nigel felt abominably restless. He prowled round the exquisite rooms, peered at their treasures which, glittering or glowing, ravishing the eye still with their precious gifts of color and symmetry, nevertheless appeared to him as ticketed already for the auctioneer's hammer. It was the last, and perhaps the truest, of all the illusions Plash Meadow had beguiled him with—this impression it now gave of a house whose soul was fled, leaving behind a simulacrum of itself soon to be broken up into a thousand sparkling fragments. Unable to endure the atmosphere indoors, Nigel went out into the garden. But there too the shadow lay, mysterious, unmistakable as the "change" on the face of a man dying. The trees, the great chestnut, stood up like a mirage: the hours of the roses were numbered.

Blount's burly figure, advancing down the drive, seemed that of a revenant, one condemned to an eternal repetition of arriving too late for the event which would have explained everything, for the moment of truth.

"That young shaver has a nerve," were his first words. "He's actually sent a telegram to say he is returning about eleven."

"Yes. His father showed it to me."

"He did, did he?" Blount mopped his forehead. "I simply can't understand these people, Strangeways. I don't mind telling you this place has got on my nerves."

The superintendent glared resentfully at Plash Meadow, as though it were some man-eating orchis which had already taken a gulp of him.

"We'll let him walk in," he said, "if that's his idea. But he won't get out again." . . .

Lionel Seaton was as punctual as his word. Eleven was striking that night when Nigel heard the sound of a car turning into the drive. There was a policeman concealed by the gate, he knew; another beneath the chestnut tree; a third in the shadow of the old barn. Inspector Gates had stationed himself in the lobby near the courtyard door. Blount was at the top of the stairs, between the landing and Robert Seaton's study, beneath whose door there showed a chink of light. Three of the police were armed, since Lionel, for all they knew, still had his Mauser.

The next minute was almost delirious anticlimax. Whistling cheerfully, Lionel came up the stairs.

"Father!" he called out, "where are you? Oh, hello, Superintendent, it's you."

"Lionel Seaton, I must take you into custody on the charge of being in unlawful possession of a firearm, and—"

"Oh fiddle-de-dee! Here it is, anyway."

From the door of his room, Nigel saw the young man politely hand the Mauser pistol to Blount. Lionel had the beginnings of a fine, leonine beard: his clothes were dusty and rumpled: he looked in the most excellent health, an advertisement for the open-air life.

"So you've found the murderer, have you?" he said. "Or was that stuff about an early arrest just your Scotland Yard eyewash?"

"You must realize that you are under arrest," said Blount sternly. "If you wish to make a statement—"

"Oh yes, I'll confess *my* crimes. You shall hear the whole issue. But I want a word with my father first. You can't object to that, surely?"

After a moment's hesitation, Blount replied, "Vairy well: but in my presence."

"Now listen, my dear Superintendent," said Lionel with engaging charm. "Mayn't I talk with him privately? You can stand outside the door. You've got the house surrounded with coppers—or you should have, anyway. What chance could I possibly have of escaping? You can search me, if you like: I've no revolvers, poisons, sharp knives or what not concealed upon my person."

"You may speak to your father in my presence," Blount stolidly repeated.

"Look here, are you charging me with the murder of my revolting uncle, or aren't you?"

"Not just at present."

"Well then," Lionel proceeded with disarming patience, "If I'm not a dangerous murderer, why all this fuss about a few private words with my old dad?"

"I cannot discuss the matter any further."

"Oh, dear, well I suppose that's that." Lionel's rueful tone was drolly reminiscent of his father's. Arms hanging beside him in a dejected attitude, he shifted his feet, scuffing the mat. "I'm sorry about that," he said slowly; then, very swiftly, "and for this," and lashed out a fist swift as a stock whip, which caught Blount on the side of the jaw and knocked him flying.

Before Nigel could move, the young man had darted down the passage into Robert's study. Nigel shouted for Gates, who came pounding up the stairs. They tried the study door: it was locked. The inspector was about to blow his whistle for reinforcements, but Nigel stopped him.

"No. Get 'em to watch the study window. He may try a jump again. And keep an eye on that car of his."

The inspector ran into a bedroom overlooking the courtyard. Nigel could hear his whistle blowing, and orders given. He turned to Blount, who was now on hands and knees, shaking his head to clear it. As he was helping Blount to his feet, Nigel saw the study door opening: he braced himself to tackle Lionel Seaton, but it was Robert who emerged. Nigel ran past him into the room: it was empty; the window stood open.

"The silly fellow jumped out," said Robert from behind him, with a chuckle.

The beams of two electric torches converged upon Lionel, who was standing quite still, as if dazed, on the grass below. The next instant he was off like an arrow. There were shouts: an oath from a policeman who had failed to intercept him; then the young man was past the chestnut tree and had run out of Nigel's sight.

By the time Nigel emerged into the courtyard, the pursuit was in full cry, torch beams waving wildly like the antennae of some agitated insect, past the outbuildings toward the orchard. Lionel had evidently not attempted to get back to his car. Going indoors, Nigel saw Blount fuming at the telephone: the local exchange was notoriously slow in answering calls.

"I think he's making for Foxhole Wood," said Nigel. "The whole damned county constabulary are after him through the orchard."

"I'll take my car on to the road on the far side of the wood and cut him off, as soon as I've put through this call. Bower's waiting for me in it. Keep an eye on things here, will you? Exchange? Get me Redcote police and look lively, my girl!"

Nigel walked thoughtfully upstairs, back to Robert's study. There he found Janet, fully clothed, at her husband's desk.

"This is for you. But I opened it," she said flatly, reaching out her hand to him with several sheets of paper in it. This is what Nigel read:

"Dear Nigel Strangeways,

"Please pass this on to the police. I don't know if there's an etiquette or legal form for confessions, but no doubt they must be amply documented, so I will try to leave nothing out.

"I killed Oswald Seaton—"

Nigel heard a car moving away into the night. Blount had got off quickly. He read on:

> "—and nobody else was involved in the murder, either beforehand or afterward. My motive was a simple one. In my young manhood, I experienced years of grinding poverty and humiliation, which killed my wife and grievously hampered my poetry. When I received Oswald's letter, and realized to my consternation that he, the rightful owner of my property, was not, as I had always believed, dead, I was in despair. I knew that I could not, at my age, face the ordeal of poverty again: I could not bear the thought of Janet, Lionel and Vanessa having to face it; above all, I'm afraid (for poets are bitterly self-centered creatures) I contemplated with utter abhorrence the prospect of returning to conditions so adverse to the writing of poetry—the prospect of becoming once again a harassed, overworked literary hack. The idea was intolerable. So, if I am to be put in the dock, perhaps there should be, after all, an accomplice standing beside me—my dear, possessive, Muse."

Nigel was so absorbed now that he only subconsciously noted the sound of another car engine purring and fading below.

> "You remember" [the letter continued] "our talk last June about the 'flash point'? Mine, I found, was a delayed one. When I replied to Oswald's letter, the idea of murder had just flicked across my mind, like the trailing edge of a fantasy, and no more. My plan was to get him here, and talk things over privately—come to some compromise with him by which, in return for giving him back the estate without demur and for keeping silent about the Mara affair, I should receive a decent income from him. I urged secrecy (a) because I believed it was necessary to present Janet with a *fait accompli,* so to say, and (b) because, at the back of my mind, there *was* the notion that if Oswald would not bargain, he must be dealt with in some other way.
>
> "On the night I expected him, I could not get Janet to go early to bed. So I decided to walk some way along the road to meet him. As I told you, the idea of his taking the short cut never occurred to me. I even waited for him outside the village (when I told you I was sheltering from the storm), some time after he should have passed by, thinking his train might have been unpunctual.
>
> "When I did get back to the house, about a quarter of one, Janet

> was awaiting me downstairs in a very agitated condition. She told me that Oswald had appeared a quarter of an hour earlier, that she had refused to let him stay in the house but agreed to hide him in the dairy till I arrived. She took him out to the dairy—it was he, not myself, whom Mara saw crossing the courtyard with her. She had lit the storm lantern and given it to him to carry, because electric lights switched on in the dairy might bring the Torrances out to investigate. When they got to the dairy, she pushed him in and locked the door, being terrified he might otherwise return to the house."

At this point, Nigel looked up, and saw that Janet Seaton was no longer in the room with him. He bent over the confession again.

> Janet will confirm all this. It became clear to me, at the time, that she was bitterly resentful—and quite naturally so—that I should have invited Oswald to come: he had told her, by the way, that he was here at my suggestion. Janet and I talked for ten minutes or so. Then she suddenly realized that she had forgotten all about Finny. She discovered he was not in his room: so we went out to look for him. Failing to find him, I sent her back to the house, taking the key of the dairy from her and saying I must now have a talk with Oswald.
>
> "As I entered the dairy, the feeling uppermost in my mind was curiosity. What had happened to Oswald? How had he survived when we were all certain he was dead? What would he be like after those ten years? I did not enter the dairy with murder in my heart. Well, of course the poor chap was not in a very amenable frame of mind, after being locked up there for half an hour. I tried to reason with him, tried to suggest a bargain; I even threatened him with the Mara business. But it was no good. He just squatted over in the corner, by the storm lantern, and jeered at me. He knew he had the whip hand, and he was not going to 'turn into a charitable organization' after what he'd been through abroad.
>
> "I began to feel desperate. Then he said something, which I won't set down, about my wife. That was the flash point. For the first time in my life I felt the spurting flame of pure hatred. I went for him and hit him hard in the face. As he fell, something slipped out of his mackintosh pocket and rattled on to the floor. He reached for it, but I got it first—the razor—and before he could grapple with me, I slashed him across the throat. At that instant I

experienced a delicious exaltation, a thrill of blind, single-minded, excruciating joy. Then it left me, and my brother was dying at my feet.

"Thereafter, things seemed to happen to me with the compulsive movement of a dream. I acted as if every detail had been planned out by me beforehand. Extraordinary. A clever, cold being took control (my antiself?): whispered in my ear that, if Oswald's features could be obliterated, there would be nothing to connect the dead man with myself and Plash Meadow. I drew the line at battering them in, though. He was quite dead by now, so I severed the head completely, removed all of his clothes, put his mackintosh on the body again, and buttoned it over the neck. Then I fetched the key of the Lacey vault, and a string bag to put the head in—one's compunctions at such times really seem very curious—I revolted from the thought of carrying it about by the hair.

"Then (assisted by my antiself, who gave me preternatural strength) I hoisted up the body, carried it along to the river, swam some way downstream with it and let it go. It was a parcel of spoilt meat; not my brother. I dropped the razor into the river at the same point. I should add that I'd stripped naked to do all this, lest I should get blood on my clothes: fortunately the blood spurt from his neck, when I struck him, had missed me. I had piled his clothes on top of mine in the dairy, which accounts for Finny's seeing only one heap of clothes. Well, when I got back to the dairy, the head was gone: I'd not been able to lock the door behind me, since I was afraid of dropping the body if I did so. I had intended to bury the head, either with Oswald's clothes in the Lacey vault, or somewhere in the orchard, for I reasoned, as to the latter, that the signs of so small a hole having been dug would not attract attention. It gave me a dreadful qualm to find the head missing. But I thought Finny Black might have taken it—I could not imagine anyone else's doing this—so I went through with the rest of my plan: sluiced down the dairy, put on my clothes, took Oswald's to the vault.

"All this, from the moment when I first entered the dairy to talk with O., occupied a little over an hour. On returning to the house, I found Janet in bed but still awake. I told her I had been discussing matters with Oswald all this time, and had finally sent him away, on the understanding that I should pay him an annual sum in return for his not troubling us any further. Janet seemed much

> relieved by this. We then went along to see if Finny had come back yet, and he did turn up a minute later—just after two o'clock.
>
> "I want to make it quite clear that no one else was implicated in what I did that night. I have reason to think that Lionel was awakened at some point and came out: he may have seen me returning from the churchyard. What Janet may have suspected, after the body was found, I do not know: I had no wish to make her a party to my secret, though I did use her later as an unwilling tool in my scheme to discover if it was Finny who had taken the head—and for this I ask her forgiveness. But neither she nor Lionel can be held as accomplices after the fact."

Nigel heard a step in the passage. Janet came into the study, her face gray and anxious.

"Has Robert been in here? I can't find him anywhere," she said.

"Let me just finish this," said Nigel, and read on:

> "I write this confession of my own free will and in my right mind. I should have done so before, seeing what trouble I've made for everyone. But I wanted to finish my sequence first. The most ironic thing of all is that the emotional upheaval caused by Oswald's death should have thrown up this rich vein of poetry. I think I have made good use of it, but I shall not be there to hear time's verdict. Please, my dear Nigel, try to convince the authorities that Lionel's behavior, though foolish, has been innocent. When his mother was dying, she asked him to look after me. He knew I was writing poetry, and he wanted to gain time for me, the dear fellow: he set about this in an ill-advised way, I know, but there was no collusion—I could not take him into my confidence. But everyone, as a certain distinguished lady once said, has been too kind, yourself included.
>
> "I have no wish to stand my trial. So, if Lionel does turn up tonight, and an opportunity arises, I shall slip away. I have a fancy to die where my heart is buried. Little Vanessa is very fond of you: perhaps you could help her through it—I don't scruple to make this last request.
>
> "And now—you remember Dorothy's words?—'The hour is come. . . . I must prepare to go. The swallows, I must leave them, the well, the garden, the roses, all. Dear creatures! . . . Well, I must go. Farewell.'
>
> ROBERT SEATON"

It had not taken Nigel many minutes to read this. Crumpling it into his pocket, he stood up. The momentary indecision cleared from his face.

"What did you say? He's not in the house?"

Janet shook her head.

"We've got to find him. Don't you realize what—?"

"No," cried Janet Seaton passionately. "Can't you let him be?" She held to Nigel's arm with a grip of extraordinary strength, but he managed to shake her off, and hurried downstairs. The car in which Lionel had come was still standing at the courtyard door. Nigel hesitated, then ran across the court to the garage. Its doors were open. The Seatons' own car was gone.

Janet was outside when he returned, a dead, sleepwalker's expression on her face.

"You shan't stop him!" she said dully. "You shan't stop him!"

Nigel put his hands on her shoulders and shook her hard.

"Tell me, where was his first wife buried? You must tell me."

"The sleeping tablets are gone from the medicine cupboard. The whole bottle. What did you say?"

"I said, 'Where was his first wife buried?' "

A dreadful pang twisted her face: then it was stubborn as stone again. "I shan't tell you."

"I'll have to ask Vanessa, then," said Nigel, getting into Lionel's car.

"No! No, I'll come with you. Just let me get my coat."

It seemed an age to Nigel before she returned, carrying her black chatelaine bag.

"It's a village about five miles beyond Redcote," she said. "In the churchyard there. It's where she was born. Great Hammersley."

They tore through the night to Hinton Lacey, across the river bridge two miles beyond it, back along the main road to Redcote. On the far side of Redcote, in a maze of lanes, they lost their way.

"I can't remember," faltered Janet. "It's so long since—"

Nigel stopped at the next village, knocked up the occupants of the first cottage. He was given sleepy, surly directions.

A mile outside this village, the engine spat, hesitated, tried again, then died. Nigel found an electric torch and a map in a sidepocket. The petrol tank was empty.

"Thank God!" muttered Janet Seaton.

"I'll just have to walk. Will you stay in the car till I get help?"

"No. I shall come with you."

They hurried on, in the livid moonlight. The lane seemed all forks and no signposts. There were four miles still to go. Nigel had the choice of making a wide detour by a hamlet which was itself nearly two miles distant and might not have a telephone, a car or a gallon of petrol to its name, and of pressing on to Great Hammersley. He chose the latter course.

Janet Seaton at first went stride for stride beside him, like a man. Later, distressed, she slowed down. Nigel stopped for a moment to study the map. Janet's voice came to him in a rasping breath.

"I implore you! Can't you let him die in peace?"

They were the last words she spoke, until they came to the outskirts of Great Hammersley and saw the squat church tower whitely sleeping in the last of the moonlight.

Then she said, "He may not be here after all. Are you sure that's what he meant?"

"We'll soon know."

"I don't see the car."

"He wouldn't drive it right into the village."

They were already whispering, as if in the presence of death. The long grass of the churchyard, sweetly scenting the night air, whispered at their feet as they brushed through it, and cast brilliants of dew, transient tears, along their way.

I ought to have telephoned to a doctor and asked him to meet us here, thought Nigel: I've mismanaged everything. But perhaps it's for the best.

His torch beam presently found the figure of Robert, lying face down, full length, upon a mound beneath a yew tree in the far corner, his hands stretched out toward the stone at its head, which told that Daisy, the dearly beloved wife of Robert Seaton, rested beneath. A faint smile showed on the poet's face when Nigel turned him over: his cheek was cold with dew: the body felt warm still to Nigel's touch, but the heart had stopped.

"Is he dead?" asked Janet from the other side of the grave.

"I think so. But we must get a doctor at once. Will you find a telephone, please, Mrs. Seaton."

When, a few minutes later, she returned, she knelt down beside the grave and awkwardly touched her husband's cheek.

"I loved him too. I *did* love him." Her voice was uncomprehending, almost querulous. Then she suddenly drew in a harsh breath. "There's blood on my hand!"

"It's only a yew berry. You must have squashed it when you knelt down," said Nigel. "But there *is* blood on your hands."

"On my—? What do you mean? Why are you looking at me like that?"

"I destroyed your husband's confession. While you were getting your coat. You took such a long time."

Janet Seaton, on her knees still, was glaring up at him.

"You *destroyed* it? Why, you must be mad." Her voice seemed to boil up from a deep cauldron of fury. "I don't believe you!"

"I destroyed it because it was not true," replied Nigel implacably. "You know it was not true, because you killed Oswald Seaton yourself."

Chapter 15

From Nigel Strangeways' Case Book

I had not destroyed the "confession," of course. I still don't know what to do about it. It's one thing to drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead, but another thing to rake them up for public obloquy. Such honored bones too. However.

Robert's confession is a masterly document—his last, and by no means his least, piece of imaginative writing. But it was just a bit too imaginative, and there are passages not at all in character with R. as I knew him: for instance, the somewhat artificial trope about his Muse (a girl he never mentioned by that name); but chiefly the analysis of his own sensations before and during the actual "murder," which gives me the impression of a brilliant, highly sensitive man trying to *imagine* himself into the mind of a murderer—there is a fictional timbre about these sentences, "delicious exaltation," "my brother was dying at my feet," and in the picture of Oswald squatting over the storm lantern and jeering at R., which doesn't ring true for me at all. No, Robert slightly overdid the verisimilitude.

These points did not strike me when I was reading through the letter last night: circumstances were not favorable for such fine perceptions. But I did notice, even then, certain things in it which didn't fit the facts or the probabilities. Whether they would get by with Blount, I am not sure. For example:

(a) Is it conceivable that Oswald, who had every reason to be suspicious of Janet, would sit quietly in the dairy for half an hour, raise no outcry, make no attempt to escape? The windows are small and high up, but it could have been managed. Wouldn't he suppose that J. had locked him in so that she might telephone the police and hand him over for the Mara business?

(b) Is it conceivable that R., a quiet, peaceable little chap, so well-balanced psychologically, should be provoked into striking his brother? He was an oldish man, after all, and oldish men don't commonly behave like fighting cocks even if their wives *are* insulted. Moreover, I am sure R. was speaking the truth about himself when, during the tea party in

June, he said, "I could never bring myself to facing my victim. It'd have to be one of those long-range murders."

(c) Is it conceivable that R. should have got no blood on his clothes from the wound in Oswald's neck? You have to be standing close to a man to strike him with a razor, and the blood would have jetted out at once.

(d) Could R. have carried the body to the river and swam out with it, unassisted (except by his "antiself")?

The answer to each of these is that it is improbable but not inconceivable: that *all* these conditions should have applied, together, makes for far greater improbability. Add to them (e) that, by Robert's account, he could not have got round to sluicing down the dairy till about half-past one at the earliest, when the second thundershower was over, yet nobody heard the sounds of sluicing; (f) Oswald's own self-defensive measure—his visit to Rennell Torrance; it's most unlikely that, in the course of a long conversation with Robert, he should not have mentioned this, and that R., knowing there was another witness to his brother's arrival at Plash Meadow, should still have murdered Oswald; but, if Janet took O. straight out to the dairy and struck him down there at once, he might well not have had time to mention his visit to Rennell; (g) the crucial point of Oswald's mackintosh; if, as R. says, O. was wearing it when he had his throat cut, why were bloodstains found all over the *outside* of the mackintosh *and* on his clothes?

This mackintosh, together with Robert's poetry, was always the key clue to the mystery.

It was not till his last interview with Blount, two days ago, that Robert decided to make his confession and "slip away." He had finished the sequence several days before that; so his statement that he was waiting to finish it before confessing is invalid. What decided him, at this interview, that the game was up? My question about the mackintosh, my hints that the whole case would be solved, if—

He knew then that I had arrived at the truth.

If what? If Janet had met Oswald and borrowed his mackintosh to walk across the court.

I tumbled to this as a result of Mara's telling me that she had seen Janet's dress showing beneath the hem of the mackintosh she was wearing: then I saw Janet walk down the drive in a *long* mackintosh; and at our last interview she agreed this was the only mac she possessed. Therefore, when she crossed the court that night, she was not wearing her own. At first I assumed she'd put on Robert's: but (a) would she allow her husband to go out into the rain, in her company, without one? (b) how could R. be there at all if the expectant father did not see him walk down the lane till quarter of an hour later?

The rational answer was that Janet had met Oswald first, and borrowed his mac to take him over to the dairy. Whether she had read Robert's letter to him and was expecting his arrival or not, is immaterial. Now, in the pocket of that mac there was a razor. And Janet is a woman of strong physique and a smoldering, ungovernable temper. It may well be that the murder was unpremeditated, that the idea of killing Oswald never occurred to her till she felt the razor in the pocket of the mackintosh.

I am convinced that this was, for her, the flash point. I believe she followed O. into the dairy and slashed his throat at once, perhaps while he was putting down the storm lantern. This is the only theory which would satisfactorily account for there being so much blood on the *outside* of the mac (it spurted on to J. immediately she had struck him), for there also being a lot of blood on Oswald's suit, and for no blood having been found on any of Janet's or Robert's clothing. It also accounts for no outcry having been heard from the dairy, for there was thunder to drown it.

Janet, then, had both means and opportunity. What of the motive? Now, all along, there could be no question that she had by far the strongest motive of all the suspects. She is a highly possessive woman. That afternoon last June, Mara said, accurately and prophetically, "Janet's ruling passion is Plash Meadow. She'd kill anyone to protect it." She had been prepared to marry Oswald himself, and had then married Robert, in order to get back the Lacey property. She doted on Plash Meadow and its contents almost to the point of mania; it, and the family name, were her obsession: I saw it on my first visit in the way she touched the ornaments. But Oswald, as the investigations in Somerset were later to prove, was doubly a menace to her. Not only was he the rightful owner of the property, but he knew—he was the only surviving person to know—the truth about the conspiracy which underlay his "suicide" ten years before. So Janet could not safeguard her property now by handing Oswald over to the police on the Mara charge: for, if she did so, Oswald would at once inform against her for having organized the "suicide" conspiracy, and she would lose the property just as surely as if Robert had himself restored it to his brother.

Robert's "confession" was a brave and remarkably ingenious effort to turn all the points against himself which were in fact pointers to Janet's guilt. Particularly brilliant was his treatment of the first episode: realizing I now knew that it was Oswald who had crossed the courtyard with Janet at half-past twelve, he developed this in a perfectly natural way to consist with her innocence of the crime or of any complicity in it. I think it just possible that his confession might have convinced the police. It was convincing, largely because so much of it was true.

This brings me to the question, why should Robert confess at all to a crime committed by a wife he did not love? Surely he was not a man to carry quixotism that far? I believe there were two reasons: first, Robert was implicated in the murder as an accessory *after* the fact; second, since this was so, and he would be likely to go to the gallows anyway, he decided to try to clear his wife. Moreover, I believe the very fact of his not loving her drove him to this decision: his sense of not having given her the love she required of him would create, in so goodhearted a man, a feeling of guilt and remorse. The "confession" was, in effect, also an expiation.

Nevertheless, it confirmed me in my opinion that Robert had been implicated in the murder—one sentence, particularly, where he says he fetched the string bag because he revolted from the thought of carrying the head about by the hair. For me, that has the ring of pure truth. I doubt if the keenest effort of imagination could have hit upon an explanation so odd, so simple, so natural. Of course, it was possible that Janet had disposed of the body and the head by herself and then confessed to Robert, who later used all the details for his own "confession." But this raises again the very serious difficulty as to the disposal of the body single-handed. Janet is a hot-tempered woman, but not a cold-blooded one. Could she have gone through, unsupported, with all the horrors that had to be gone through after the murder? I very much doubt it.

Robert, in a mood of exalted altruism, *could* have done so. Apart from this, the way Janet's and Robert's stories tallied, at the various stages of the investigation, indicates that there was close collusion between them.

My reconstruction* of the events is as follows, then: Janet takes Oswald out to the dairy, kills him, peels off the bloodstained mackintosh and leaves it and the razor in the dairy, which she locks behind her. The crime was unpremeditated: she is dazed, has lost her nerve. She hurries back to the house to find Robert. When he returns from his walk, she tells him everything—probably says it's all his fault, really, for having invited Oswald to the house. Robert says he will help her to conceal the crime. After that, everything takes place as in his confession, except that the pair of them do it between them. The head was clumsily severed because it had to be done by the light of the storm lantern alone. I should imagine that Robert would undertake the more gruesome jobs, but that they both carried the body down to the river, and while they were doing this, Finny stole the head. The phrases about the "antiself" in his confession are perhaps significant here, in view of Robert's relations with Janet: it's just the sort of mischievous twist he might have given to it—that "assisted by my antiself, who gave me preternatural strength, I hoisted up the body," etc.

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* This was later to be substantially confirmed. N.S.

Lionel's subsequent behavior is contributory evidence of Robert's complicity. One must take into account what he said to me on the lawn, the first day I was staying at Plash Meadow: particularly his remark that he must "see Vanessa through the present dust-up," and the way he tried to sound me then. Again, if he had not seen Robert behaving suspiciously at some time that night, why should he go to such extraordinary lengths to divert suspicion upon himself? He certainly wouldn't have done it for his stepmother, at any rate. And he'd hardly have done it *merely* to give his father time for finishing the poem: for, if Lionel had no reason to suppose his father implicated in the crime, then he equally had no reason to fear that the discovery of the truth about the crime would put a term to his father's writing.

To return to Janet's guilt. It was finally proved, to my own private satisfaction, last night in the churchyard. Also, by her attempts to delay our arrival there, which she pretended were for Robert's sake—so that he might not be prevented from committing suicide and compelled to stand his trial, but actually were made so as to insure that he *did* die before he could be questioned about his "confession." But also, in the course of the investigation, she gave herself away more than once. (1) On the day after the murder she was "very queer and edgy," according to Mara; (2) she resisted a police search of the house; (3) during her first conversation with me, she fell into the trap of agreeing that the night of Thursday/Friday was the operative period, though she should not have known, at that time, *when* Oswald was killed; she managed to cover up this slip pretty well; (4) she was extremely discomposed when I first questioned Robert and herself about the unknown man who had lived here all his life and left the village under a cloud nine or ten years ago; (5) she was equally rattled—and indeed contradicted herself—when I asked her whether she had borrowed Robert's mackintosh to wear across the court. Now each of these points is open to a more innocent interpretation—that Janet knew of Oswald's return, suspected Robert of having killed him, but was chiefly worried lest the investigation should reveal her share in the conspiracy of Oswald's "suicide."

But then (6) comes the affair of the clay head. In his "confession," Robert had to skate very lightly over this: he speaks of using Janet as "an unwilling tool in my scheme to discover if it was Finny who had taken the (Oswald's) head." Yet, if J. was no more than an "unwilling tool," if she did not yet know the identity of the murdered man, why did she provoke Mara to do a head of *Robert?* How could she know that the murdered man bore a strong facial resemblance to her husband and that therefore a clay head of the latter would be most likely to cause Finny to repeat his performance of head snatching? This was the crucial question which I decided not to ask her at the time. But, still more betraying, was (7) Janet's extraordinary admission that Finny was her bastard son. In the first place, the police have found not a trace of evidence to support it. Second, if it were true, it is inconceivable that a woman of Janet's pride should have admitted it, except in a desperate effort to avert some worse situation. She did, in fact, come out with this confession, as a last resort, to give color to her story that the whole clay-head stratagem was aimed at the protection of Finny Black. But I simply could not believe that a woman of Janet's character would make such an appalling admission in defense of Finny, or even of her husband—in defense of anyone but herself. Moreover, on Finny's own evidence, it was Janet who had told him not to "answer" the police's questions.

All this pointed at least to Janet's complicity in the crime. But it did not prove that it was she who struck the fatal blow. On the other hand, I am morally certain that Robert did *not:* so, by elimination, and apart from the evidence of the bloodstained mackintosh, etc., Janet must have done it. I am convinced that Robert, in spite of the strong murder motives he set down in his "confession," had an excellent reason for keeping Oswald alive. So we come to the roots of the case—Robert's poetry.

The main thread was put into my hands that day in June, when I met Robert Seaton for the first time. That oddly revealing little remark about the hens looking "so much at a loose end" : the signs of hobbies taken up and dropped: the impression of boredom: the look of misery on his face when Janet referred to the epic of the Great War, which he was supposed to have been at work on for years, but which there was no trace of in his manuscript books: above all, his version of the Sleeping-Beauty story. "Have you thought what really kept her there? Not the thorns, but the roses." And "the Queen took away all the spinning wheels": a perfect Freudian slip: in the real story it is the King who takes them away: Robert was expressing his unconscious resentment against Janet, against Plash Meadow, and everything they stood for, *because they had deprived him of the power to write poetry.* So "the poor girl" (his Muse) "had nothing to do but moon about and admire her own reflection in the roses." What's more, Rennell Torrance, when he made that outbreak of his, said, "One of these fine days you'll be asked to account for your talent. And you'll have to answer, 'I buried it, Master—buried it under a heap of roses.' " Rennell had a pretty good notion that Robert had been for years inactive.

And then Robert went on. "I don't believe in that Prince. He'd never have got through the thorns. It'd take the Beast to do that. Some rough beast." And the Beast did turn up. Oswald Seaton. And Robert jumped at the opportunity: it gave him the chance (with a perfectly good conscience, for Oswald was after all its rightful owner) to leave Plash Meadow, to break the cataleptic trance it had thrown upon his Muse, to return to the conditions under which—however grim they had been—he had in the past produced poetry. To kill Oswald would be to destroy his last chance of freeing the creator in himself.

Yet how could I convince Blount of this? He's an exceptionally able and broad-minded man, but no Scotland Yard officer, no layman at all perhaps, can be expected to understand the motive force of the creative artist—how he is compelled by this unpredictable force to subject himself and anyone connected with him to hardship, to indignity, to apparent caprice or an inhuman routine, so that a few precious drops of immortality may be squeezed out.

I was deceived myself, for some time, by Robert's insouciance about the crime. I took it for innocence: and of course he was innocent of the actual killing. Possibly, being human, he got a certain kick from the altruism of his own conduct in helping Janet conceal her crime. But the great change I noticed from the Robert Seaton of June—the new briskness, vitality, clarity which I felt in him—was the result of his having begun to write poetry again. As he says, this was the ironical effect of Oswald's death; for him, its prime effect. And the fact that, at last, he was re-engaged upon the work for which nature had designed him, and knew it was good, gave him an extraordinary detachment: in his interviews with Blount and myself, he seemed to maintain the attitude of an intelligent but dispassionate observer. Compared with the poem he was writing, the criminal investigation was secondary—a game which he now had enough spare energy to take part in, to play with a certain impudent ease, to relish almost. This culminated in his audacious, yet literally accurate statement, "I am willing to swear, on my oath, that I never saw Oswald alive after that day, ten years ago, when he disappeared."

It would not do to exaggerate this. Robert was not behaving irresponsibly. It was just that, for a while, his social responsibility yielded place to a more urgent one: he had to be about his Father's business. If he seemed to treat Oswald's death, and its inevitable consequences, with a sort of impish disrespect, it was only as a man upon whom sentence of death has been passed finds the ordinary world unreal: he may be excused a certain levity. I am sure Robert knew that the case could, for him, have only one ending. His was a heart of gold. He tried to arrange it so that no one else should permanently suffer for the crime. I can't forget how the editor of the local paper said of Robert's first wife, "It was his poetry, when you get down to the bottom of it, which killed her." Robert must have felt the same about Oswald and Janet: if he hadn't invited Oswald down, with the intention of getting the paralyzing weight of Plash Meadow lifted from his shoulders, Janet would never have gone in danger of the gallows. History had repeated itself: the destructive potentiality in genius was vindicated once again. . . .

Lord, how he would have chuckled at all this solemn stuff! "I've written my confession, so for God's sake get on with it and spare us your pretentious analyses and moralizings!" I can hear him say it. But the "confession" does pose me a difficult moral problem. On the one hand, it's basically untrue, it might quite possibly fail to convince the police, and to make it public would be to tarnish unjustly the fame of a great, good man. On the other hand, if the police did accept the confession, it would mean Lionel's being let off comparatively lightly, Janet's being saved from hanging or life imprisonment (though the case of her conspiracy in Oswald's "suicide" would be pursued, no doubt), and therefore Robert's last wishes would have been respected.

How could I bring myself to disregard them? But then, how could I bear to dishonor his name? Who am I to conceal truth or to falsify justice? But which would serve truth and justice the better—to destroy his confession or to hand it over to the authorities?

I wish someone could tell me. . . .

(continued from front flap)

cyanide capsule! The investigation quickly reveals that this seemingly proper British bureaucracy is awash in love triangles, blackmail and treason.

Head of a Traveler: Although Robert Seaton is a renowned poet, there is nothing poetic about the decapitated body found in the river near Plash Meadow, his family estate. Nigel and Scotland Yard Inspector Blount are hard-pressed to ID the body until Finny Black, a mute dwarf in the family's employ, finds a string bag containing the head of Robert's older brother—thought drowned many years ago. Since a confession comes relatively early, the questions in this chilling mystery go far beyond "Who done it?" Is the confession real? Why has Poet Seaton been singularly unprolific of late? How does the long and dubious history of the estate's ownership fit in? The answers prove disturbing to the usually unflappable Nigel.

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